



Eternal by teej.318

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Friendship, Romance

Language: English

Status: In-Progress

Published: 2019-05-02 16:30:12

Updated: 2019-06-17 20:53:22

Packaged: 2019-12-12 18:33:21

Rating: T

Chapters: 10

Words: 40,903

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Mike Wheeler and his twin Richie are the new kids at Hawkins High. On their first day, they meet the rest of the party and quickly make friends with them. But there could deeper feelings between the new friends. Alternate universe story, no Upside Down. Though my character Chris Byers appears, this is an alternate version of him.

1. The New Kids

Chris knocked on the door of his Aunt Joyce and Uncle Hopper, a difficult task, given the tray of iced coffee he was holding in his hands along with his history book. Luckily, he didn't have to wait long, as Will opened the door, beaming when he saw Chris.

"Morning!" said Will brightly.

"Here, take yours and El's," Chris said, lowering the tray of coffee. Will took two of the cups out of it and led Chris into the house. Chris set down the tray of ice and took his backpack off, opening it and attempting to stuff his history book into it.

"Oh my god, I love you," said El when she walked into the living room, carrying her own bag and history book. Chris grinned at her. El took the iced coffee that Will offered her and immediately took a big sip.

"Now what did we talk about, El? Don't go drinking too much of that stuff!" came a chastising voice. The kids looked up and saw Jim had walked into the kitchen with them, already dressed in his police chief's outfit.

"Can't help it, Dad," said El, shrugging and taking another sip. "This stuff gets me started in the day."

Jim chuckled.

"You sure you don't wanna be a cop?" he asked.

"No," El said with emphasis while Will and Chris grinned at each other. "I'd rather do something useful with my life."

"Ouch," said Joyce as she joined all of them in the kitchen. "I guess you're harsh in the mornings, aren't you, honey?"

El shrugged. "Can't help it," she said, laughing.

"Well, listen, you guys better get on to Max's and to school," Joyce said. "You have your English paper, Will?"

"Yeah, I checked three times before I came downstairs," said Will.

"Chris, you too?"

Chris nodded.

"Mom wouldn't let me leave the house without showing it to her, Aunt Joyce."

"Wise decision on her part," said Joyce with a mischievous grin. "I know how you like to forget things."

"Hey now..." said Chris in an annoyed tone, but Joyce was smiling widely.

"Only joking, honey. You and Will gonna go to the arcade tonight?"

"It is Wednesday. We get our half off prices starting at 7, so we'll definitely be there. Will owes me a game of air hockey anyway."

"I said I'd think about it," Will said, rolling his eyes.

"Seemed like you made a promise to me," said Chris, grinning.

"Well, then I'll see you tonight when you pick Will up," said Joyce. "I've got the day off today, so I'll be here all day enjoying the silence."

"You've certainly earned it, Mom," said El, giving Joyce a hug.

"Thanks, honey. Now you kids get on to school, okay? I'll see you all later. Have a great day!"

Chris zipped up his backpack and picked up the ice tray, following Will and El out of the kitchen. He turned around and called to Jim just before he walked out the front door.

"Dad said he'd get breakfast this morning, Uncle Jim. He said you can owe him one."

Jim chuckled.

"Thanks, kiddo."

"See ya!"

Chris followed Will and El out the front door and shut it behind him. Together, the three of them walked three houses down, where Max was waiting on her front porch for them to arrive.

"Chris, you're a bloody lifesaver," she said, jumping up and hurrying over to Chris. She took the remaining iced coffee and started drinking it. Chris pulled his out of the tray and threw it into Max's trashcan before they started walking on. "I was up till like 1:30 getting debate prep ready for this weekend. I swear it's going to be murder."

"Girl, you gotta get more sleep!" said El. "We can't have you being more irritable than normal, now can we?"

"See, now if Chris or I had set that, Max would be staring at us with daggers in her eyes," said Will before Max could speak. Max glared at him.

"Yeah, because only El is allowed to tell me I'm irritable," she said coolly before she grinned at the boys. "Anyway, Chris, have your parents decided on what they're gonna do yet for the Halloween party next week?"

"Oh yeah," said Chris as they rounded the corner that would take them to Hawkins High School. "They're gonna go with a 'Scream-a-thon.' They wanna watch all four Scream movies during the night. And since Halloween is on a Saturday for a change, maybe we'll actually get to watch all of them!"

"That's badass," Max said with a smile. "It's gonna be a lot of fun."

"Yeah, definitely beats the rain out we had last year," said Will.

"I will kill a man if that happens again," Chris said with a laugh. "Dad wouldn't stop bitching about it for like two months after that. I almost had to whack him upside the head."

"He probably would've shot you," said El with a grin as they approached the school's entrance.

"Yeah, that's his solution for everything, isn't it?" said Chris,

shrugging and grinning. "At least Uncle Jim doesn't threaten you all with it on a daily basis. Course he doesn't have a son with a black belt, either, so I guess there's that."

Just as they entered the school, the bell announcing 10 minutes until first period rang. They all groaned slightly as they all finished drinking their coffee.

"Thanks again for the coffee, Chris," Max said as she and El turned to walk off to their English class. "You're a lifesaver."

"Don't mention it. See you guys at lunch."

Mr. Teeter stood up when all of the students had sat down after the bell had rung to signal the start of class. He walked up to the front of the room, coffee in hand. He smiled at the class before he spoke.

"All right, everyone, we're gonna have an easy class period this morning," he said. "Since we're starting a new unit today, you'll spend today reading the next chapter and answer the questions at the end of it..."

Mr. Teeter stopped when there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," he said.

The door opened and Mr. Baier, their principal, walked in, followed by a nervous-looking boy. The boy was rather tall and lanky and had curly, dark hair. He looked around the classroom nervously and caught eyes with Chris, who smiled at him. The boy smiled back and then looked at his feet.

"Mr. Teeter, this is our new student, he's starting in your class this morning," said Mr. Baier. "This is Michael Wheeler."

Chris watched as the boy looked like he was going to say something, but thought better of it. Mr. Teeter thanked Mr. Baier, who walked out of the room, closing the door behind him.

"So, Michael..." started Mr. Teeter before the boy spoke up.

"It's just Mike."

"Okay, Mike. We're gonna have an easy lesson today, so you don't have to worry about anything. Why don't you partner up with Chris over there?" he said, gesturing to Chris, who perked up in his seat and nodded at Mr. Teeter. "His old lab partner moved away last week and since we're starting a new unit, you two can work together for now."

Mike nodded wordlessly and sat down in the seat behind Chris, who tried to smile reassuringly at Mike. Mike nodded at him before he sat down and faced the front.

"As I was saying, everyone, you'll read the next chapter in the book and work on answering the questions at the end of the chapter. This chapter is a little longer, so I thought I'd give you the whole period today to read it and start answering questions, which will be due at the start of class tomorrow morning. If you have any questions, I'll be at my desk grading your last lap reports. Feel free to work together on the questions, but let's try and keep the noise level to a dull roar, shall we?"

A handful of the students chuckled as Mr. Teeter gave them all another smile before returning to his desk at the back of the room and starting on the mountain of paperwork he had to grade.

Chris turned around and faced Mike.

"I'll take you over to my favorite spot to work in here," said Chris. "Teeter doesn't mind if we sit over there during this busy work days and it's more comfortable over there anyway."

Mike nodded at Chris and followed him to the side of the room, where there were several beanbags sitting on the floor. Chris claimed the green one, while Mike picked the blue one.

"Teeter said your name is Chris?" said Mike, unsure of how to start this conversation.

Chris nodded warmly at Mike.

"Chris Byers," he said, holding out his hand and offering it to Mike.

Mike took it and they shook hands briefly.

"Mike Wheeler," said Mike.

"So, Mike, where do ya come from?"

"A small town in Kansas," said Mike, looking slightly crestfallen. "It's probably not a place you've heard of."

"Try me," said Chris.

"It's a town called Andover."

"Yes, I know the place. It's right outside of Wichita, isn't it?"

"How'd you know?"

"I have some extended family who live in Wichita and we've visited them from time-to-time. I think we drove to Andover on our way to an uncle's farm out in the country."

"Small world," said Mike with a grin.

"Yeah it is."

"So, have you lived in Hawkins long?"

"All my life," said Chris. "My parents both grew up here and they decided they'd rather have their lives here than anywhere else. My dad is a homicide detective and my Mom works for WTHR."

"What's that, a TV station?"

Chris nodded.

"Yeah, she's one of the evening anchors at the station. And she never tires of telling me that David Letterman worked there way back when in his early days."

"That's pretty cool!" said Mike.

"It'd be cool if she would quit reminding me of it about once a month!"

The boys laughed heartily.

"Hey, listen, Mike, I know being a new student can be rough on the first day. If you'd like, you could sit with me and my friends at lunch."

Mike beamed at him.

"That'd be great! Um, would it be all right if my brother Richie sat with us too? He's kind of a nut, but I'm sure he'd like to meet some new people."

"Oh, you have a brother?"

"Twin, actually. He looks exactly like me except he has glasses. And he's constantly cracking jokes."

"He sounds like my buddy Dustin," said Chris. "He's always been a handful, but I love him anyway. And yeah, feel free to let your brother know to join us. It'd be nice to have some new friends in our group."

Will looked over at the new student with the rather large glasses who had sat down next to him. The boy seemed a little nervous, having pulled out his book and starting to read it as soon as Mr. Wilmott had told them to get to work. Will cleared his throat and the boy looked up.

"Hi, I'm Will, Will Byers," Will said.

"Hello, Willie Will Byers, I'm Richie Wheeler."

"Willie Will?" asked Will, frowning at the boy.

Richie grinned at him.

"I like to give people nicknames. It helps me remember who they are."

"That's kinda a weird one for me," said Will.

"True, but I can't think of anything else to call you, Willie Will."

Will couldn't help but chuckle at this before he continued.

"Listen, you wanna work together on this? It'll help us get done quicker."

"Sure thing, Willie Will," said Richie before he looked over his shoulder. Will frowned at Richie, who seemed satisfied as he turned around and lowered his voice so only Will would hear him. "What kind of teacher tells his students just to read the book, write down the theories and then do the homework? Shouldn't he, you know, teach?"

Will grinned.

"That's Wilmott for you," he said. "He's not much of a teacher, but at least he lets us work on homework during class so we don't have a pile to take home."

"Kind of a shitty thing for a teacher to do, don't you think? I mean, shouldn't he at least lecture for a bit?"

Will shrugged. "I mean, yeah, it'd be nice if he would do a better job of explaining stuff to us, but I don't know, it's kind of nice having a teacher who will let us learn at our own pace."

"If you say so, Willie Will," said Richie, turning back to his book and continuing to read it.

For the rest of class, Richie cracked several jokes as he and Will worked on their homework. Will was slightly annoyed that Richie kept calling him Willie Will, but the name was starting to grow on him by the end of class. As the bell rang and everyone gathered their stuff, Will caught Richie's attention.

"Hey, would you want to sit with me and my friends at lunch? It's just me, my cousin, my stepsister and a couple of our friends."

Richie's face lit up.

"I'd love to, Willie Will! If it's cool, I'll have my twin join us too."

"The more the merrier," Will said with a smile.

Chris and Will walked out of their English class together, bound for the lunchroom with the rest of the student body. They didn't say anything until they had reached the lunchroom and gotten their food. Chris grabbed a table that had enough chairs around it and set his tray down. Will mimicked him.

"So, what's Mike like?" Will asked.

"Kinda quiet, but he seems super nice. How about Richie?"

"Obnoxious, but he's pretty funny."

"Yeah, that's how Mike described him," Chris said before he caught Mike's eye and waved him over. Mike sat down across from them, grinning nervously. "Hey, Mike, this is my cousin, Will."

"Hi," said Will with a smile.

"Nice to meet you," said Mike, sounding slightly nervous. Will blushed, but managed to hide it from Mike as he looked down and picked up the apple on his tray. Chris looked at Will curiously before he picked up his own apple.

"Over here, Richie!" Mike called, waving his twin over. Richie sat down next to Mike.

"Hello Mike and Ike, and Willie Will," Richie said.

"Don't call me that," said Mike irritably.

"Oh come on, you know you love it!"

Mike rolled his eyes as Richie turned to Chris.

"And you are?" Richie prompted.

"I'm Chris Byers, Will's cousin."

"Ah, hello Christopher Byers," Richie said, rolling his R's when he said

Chris' full name.

Chris chuckled to himself.

"I guess that's gonna be your nickname for me?" he asked.

Richie glanced at Will, beaming.

"You told him I give nicknames?"

Will shrugged. "I guess that was my way of warning him."

"Well thanks for that, Willie Will," said Richie as the rest of the party sat down at the table, looking at the twins curiously.

"Ah, now everyone's here," said Chris. "This is Dustin," he gestured to his left. "Lucas and Max, the power couple of Hawkins High," he gestured to Will's right. "And this is Jane, Will's stepsister, but we all call her Eleven or El."

"Like the number?" asked Richie, sounding amused.

"Long story," said Chris with a grin.

"I like stories!" Richie said excitedly. "Tell me, tell me, tell me."

El looked slightly taken aback at Richie's excitement, but smiled at him.

"Back in the first grade, there was another Jane in my class. Since I was the 11th person alphabetically, I told everyone to call me Eleven so they wouldn't mix us up. It's kinda stuck ever since then. Now, pretty much everyone calls me El for short."

"El...I like it!" Richie said as he picked up the sandwich on his tray and started to devour it.

"So, tell us a little bit about you two," said Chris.

"We moved here last week," said Mike. "Like I told you in chemistry class, we moved here from Andover."

"Yeah we had to get away from our shit father after he and Mom split

up!" said Richie. Mike glared at him, but Richie shrugged. "Hey, it's true, Mike and Ike. We had to get out of Dodge."

"Well, join the club on divorced parents," said Dustin. "My parents have been divorced basically all my life."

"And my parents split a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away," said Will, nodding.

"Oh my god, a Star Wars reference, I knew I liked you for a reason, Willie Will," Richie interrupted. Will smiled at him.

"My Mom remarried El's dad Jim, the police chief, and my bio Dad is long out of my life."

"No shit, your dad's the police chief?" asked Richie.

El nodded silently, grinning despite herself.

"So what about the rest of you?" asked Mike. "Tell us about you."

"Well I'm on the JV basketball team," said Lucas. "I'm not a real jock by any means, but I still like to play."

"I'm on the debate team," said Max, "so don't ever think you'll win an argument with me."

"She's right," said Chris with a grin.

"Shush!" Max demanded, but she was smiling nonetheless.

"I'm a bit of a theatre nerd," said Dustin with a smile. "Will is too for that matter, but I'm usually not in starring role. I prefer playing secondary characters."

For the rest of the lunch period, the group of eight continued getting to know each other as they cleared their trays. Soon, the bell rang to announce they had to get to their next class. El, Max, Dustin and Lucas stood up together and threw away their trash before bringing their trays to the wash area before they left, all heading in the same direction for the English class they shared together after lunch. Will, Chris, Mike and Richie did the same before they regrouped over by

the lockers.

"Hey, listen, if you guys wanna get out for a bit tonight, you can come with Will and me to the arcade tonight," said Chris. "We usually go on Wednesday nights since they have half off prices on all games after 7."

"I don't know, I might have quite a bit of homework," Mike mumbled before Richie cut him off.

"We'll be there," Richie said. "We'll have to ask our Mom, but I'm sure she'd say yes to hanging out with some new friends."

Chris and Will grinned at them.

"You want us to meet you there?" asked Will.

"Sure thing, Willie Will," Richie said, pulling his phone out of his pocket and handing it to Will. "Just put your number in there and text me the address and Mike and Ike and I will find it."

"I wonder what's keeping Max?" Will mused as he stood with Chris and El in front of the school.

"She'll catch up," Chris said, shrugging. "We'd better get going, otherwise we're gonna get trapped by the buses."

Will nodded and followed Chris and El away from the entrance. Once they were off school grounds, El started to talk.

"Ugh, these next few days are going to be totally insane," she complained. "I'm gonna be up all night cramming for that history test tomorrow, we've got three new moves to incorporate into our routine, the game is just two days away. I'm gonna be totally wiped out!"

"I don't think you have enough going on," said Will with a smile. "You should do more."

"Totally," said El.

At that, Max ran up behind them, looking cross.

"Hey, assholes, thanks for waiting for me!" she said.

"Well hurry your ass up next time!" said Chris. Max glared at him and gave him a light slap on the arm before she turned to El, grinning.

"I saw you had fun after lunch," she teased.

"Max, shut up!" El demanded.

"What happened after lunch?" Will said curiously.

Max grinned at El, who glared back at her as they kept walking. They were just a few hundred steps away from Max's house.

"Oh, come on, El, you gotta tell them!" Max said.

El sighed deeply before she responded.

"Paul dragged me into the boys' locker room after lunch," El said.

"Exploring uncharted territory, were you?" asked Will, sounding amused.

"We just talked," El insisted.

"Sure, sure," Chris said sarcastically.

El scowled at Chris.

"So, what did El-Jerko want to talk about in the locker room?" asked Max.

"Same thing he's been talking about ever since we broke up last time: when are we gonna get together again?"

"Is he bugging you? Do I need to give him a whoopin'?" asked Chris, sounding totally serious.

El laughed.

"No, Mr. Black Belt, you don't need to kick his ass, I can do that

myself," she said. "I just told him I will let him know if I'm interested in dating him again; I'm just not sure a relationship is what I want right now."

"Good for you, girl," said Max as they reached her house. "Well you remind him that I'll kick his ass too if he keeps asking."

El grinned at her.

"See ya later," El said.

"Bye, assholes!" Max said before she turned around and walked inside.

Chris, Will and El walked on toward Joyce and Jim's home, talking about Mike and Richie.

"Richie's a bit much, but he seems super funny," said El. "And I love how he gives us all nicknames."

"Hard to call my full first name a nickname," Chris said with a grin. "Even if he does roll the R's to make it sound cooler."

El shrugged.

"I think it suits you," she said. "And I like yours, too, Will."

"I'll admit it is growing on me," Will replied as they reached the front yard. Chris and El hugged each other before El walked inside while the boys remained behind.

"I could tell you seemed to find Mike attractive," Chris said nonchalantly.

"What?" said Will, sounding flustered. "No, you must've been seeing things."

"Will, I'm like your brother, I know what you look like when you see someone you're attracted to."

Will sighed.

"Yeah, I guess Mike is pretty good looking. Richie too for that matter since they look exactly the same minus the glasses."

"So...?" Chris prompted.

"So what?"

"You could ask him out, you know. After you've gotten to know him a bit. I don't know, but I got a 'he's not quite straight' vibe from Mike while we were talking. And he did seem a little flustered when you two were introduced."

"He was just nervous, Chris!"

"If you say so, Will. Listen, you can at least give it a chance with Mike. All I'm saying is you deserve to be happy, Will."

"And what about you?"

"You know me: I don't date. Period. I'm not attracted to anyone romantically or sexually, and I just love people as friends and family."

"Weirdo," said Will giving Chris a playful hug.

"What can I say, Will? I was born that way. Besides, it means I avoid a broken heart."

"You sure Richie doesn't have a little crush on you?" Will asked.

"If he does, I'll let him down gently. Anyway, I'd better get home and help Dad get dinner ready before Mom comes home for her dinner break. I'll call you later when I'm on my way to come and get you."

"Thanks, Mom!" Richie said as he hurried up the stairs toward his and Mike's room. He barreled into the room and walked over to Mike's bed.

"Good news, Mom said we can go to the arcade!" Richie exclaimed as he sat down next to Mike. Mike didn't respond or even turn to look at Richie, who frowned. "Hey, you awake?"

Slowly Mike turned around to face Richie, whose eyes widened when he saw his brother's face. Mike had been crying and had fresh tears falling down his cheeks. Richie scooted over to Mike and put his arms around him.

"Are you okay? What's wrong?" Richie demanded.

"I missed him a lot today," Mike whispered in response.

Richie nodded at him.

"I know," he whispered back. "I missed him, too. But he was there with us."

Mike cried into Richie's shoulder for a few seconds before he sat back up in Richie's embrace.

"I can't help think about the last time I spoke to him. He tried to tell me how he was feeling but I didn't understand what he meant, and I just told him it would be okay. And then it wasn't."

"You loved him," Richie said simply. "And he loved you. He never doubted that you cared for him, Mike. He knew that, I promise you."

"I know, I just can't help thinking about that last conversation. I should have seen it."

"What happened wasn't your fault, Mike. I hope you know that."

It was several seconds before Mike nodded and fell into Richie's embrace again.

"Thank you, Richie. For being here."

"Listen, do you want me to cover for you with Will and Chris?" Richie asked gently. "I can tell them that you've got a lot of homework or something."

"No, it's fine," Mike said, sitting up and wiping away the last of his tears. "I'll go. If anything, it'll help take my mind off things for a bit."

"And we could both use some new friends in this new place," Richie

said with a smile. "Now, come on Mike and Ike. Mom says dinner's nearly ready and I'm starving!"

2. The Arcade

Chris held the door open for Will, and followed his cousin into the arcade. The two boys walked up to the counter, where Keith was working as he usually did when Will and Chris hung out at the arcade on Wednesday evenings.

"Hey Keith," said Chris, pulling a five dollar bill from his wallet and handing it over. "We'll have 40 coins like usual, please."

"Sure thing, kid," said Keith, taking the five dollar bill and inspecting it before he pulled out a cup full of tokens and slid them across the counter. "Tell your Mom hi from me, all right?"

Chris simply gave Keith a grimace that Keith mistook for a smile. The boys walked away, Will almost shaking from giggles.

"Oh shut up," said Chris.

"Hey, Aunt Pearl is a pretty lady, so you can't blame him for having a crush on her."

"Yeah, but having that goofball drool over my mother isn't something I like to think about," said Chris. "You better hope he doesn't see Aunt Joyce sometime, otherwise Mom is gonna have some competition."

Both boys burst into laughter just as Mike and Richie walked into the arcade. Richie's eyes lit up as he took in his surroundings, while Mike looked around politely, but didn't seem as enthused as his twin. After Richie had gotten a good look at everything in the arcade, he spotted Chris and Will and his face lit up even more, if that were possible. The twins hurried over to the Byers cousins.

"Man, this place looks fucking sick!" Richie exclaimed. "We don't have any arcades back home anymore and this place blows the old one way out of the water!"

"It should be a crime to not have an arcade in town," said Chris, grinning at Richie's expression.

"Truer words have never been spoken, Chris!" Richie replied, still

rolling the Rs in his name.

"What no Christopher?" Chris asked, doing a passable imitation of Richie rolling the letters.

"Nah, I figure saying Chris takes up less time and effort," Richie said proudly.

Will and Chris both chuckled while Mike rolled his eyes.

"Where do we get tokens?" Mike asked.

"Over there by the counter," said Will. "I'll walk with you; you shouldn't have to deal with Keith for the first time on your own."

"Who's Keith?" Richie asked excitedly.

"An All-American gaming nerd who makes Jabba the Hutt look human," Chris replied deadpan, causing Richie to snort with laughter. Will giggled and motioned for Mike to follow him and the two boys walked away. Once they were alone, Chris turned to Richie.

"Is Mike okay?" he asked with concern in his tone. "He seems a little quieter than he was at school today."

Richie glanced over at the counter to make sure Mike was still over there with Will before responding.

"Let's just say he's missing someone," Richie said in a whisper. "It's kinda a long story, so I wouldn't worry about it too much. He said he's happy to be here, says it'll help keep his mind off of things."

Chris nodded at Richie, feeling uncertain as Will and Mike returned. Mike was carrying a cup of tokens identical to the one Chris had.

"So, what are we gonna play first?" Richie asked.

"Well, Will does owe me a game of air hockey, so I thought we'd start with that."

"Ooh, let's team up!" Richie exclaimed. "Chris, you and me can face Mike and Ike and Willie Will in a match."

"It's on!" Will said, rolling up his sleeves. "I don't know about you, Mike, but I play a pretty good game of air hockey."

"Yeah, I'm all right at it," Mike said with a grin that looked forced to Chris.

The boys hurried over to the air hockey game, and Chris put some coins in. Chris and Richie made quite a team, able to sense each other's moves and were able to silently communicate counterattacks before Will and Mike could respond quickly. Will was extremely focused in the game, while Mike seemed distracted and only half-heartedly hitting the puck when it came near him. After about 10 minutes, Chris and Richie had won the game spectacularly and gave each other a victory hug while Mike and Will grinned at each other and shrugged.

For the next hour or so, the boys played several games in the arcade. Some they played against each other, while others they played alone while the others watched. By the time all of the tokens had ran out, it was pushing 8:45.

"Let's get some snacks," Chris suggested when he was finally killed one last time in the Star Wars arcade game. The rest of the boys had been standing around him, loudly cheering him on before Vader struck down Chris' Luke, ending the game. "Will, you get us some seats and I'll come back with some nachos for everyone."

Will nodded and led Richie and Mike over to the dining area while Chris walked over to the concession stand and ordered four sets of nachos. The order was ready in about two minutes and Chris thanked the worker before walking over to the table, awkwardly carrying everybody's nachos. When he appeared, Mike stood up.

"You could've had one of us help," he said with a grin that seemed to be the first genuine smile on his face that evening. Mike took two of the nacho containers out of Chris' hands and gave one to Richie before sitting down with one of his own.

"Ah, it's nothing," said Chris as he sat down and slid Will's nachos over to him. "Besides, it's not like when the rest of the party is at the skating rink and I try to bring over nachos with skates on."

Richie and Will laughed heartily while Mike grinned and chewed on one of his chips. The boys ate together in silence for a few moments before Richie popped up again.

"So, Chris, tell us a little more about you."

Chris grinned.

"What do you wanna know, Rich?"

"I don't know, like are you dating anyone?"

Chris and Will glanced at each other before Chris burst out laughing. Mike and Richie looked at each other, confused as Chris kept laughing.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Richie," Chris said as Will rolled his eyes. "I just always find it funny when anyone asks if I'm dating someone. It's cute that people think that I should date someone."

"Why wouldn't you date someone?" Mike asked, frowning.

"First of all, I've never been attracted to anyone, like ever. I mean, yes, I've seen my fair share of attractive people, my dear cousin here not included."

"Fuck off," Will said with a grin as he punched Chris on the arm.

"Only kidding, dear Will," Chris said as he laughed. "Anyway, I mean, I find people attractive, sure, but I've never been romantically attracted to someone, y'know? It's weird, I know, but I've always felt that way."

"And there's another reason, too," Will said with a nudge.

"Yeah that's true," said Chris.

"What's the other reason?" asked Richie, looking completely enthralled with Chris' story.

"I think relationships are a waste of time, at least for me. I've seen one too many relationships fail over the stupidest things that I think

it would be a waste of my time and my partner's time if we're gonna date and then drop it over something stupid. Besides, I don't like the idea of having my life revolve around another person's. It's bad enough I have to focus on my own life and my own problems, but to have to worry about someone else on top of that, I think it'd be too much."

Chris shrugged as he finished his explanation while Mike and Richie looked back at him with stunned expressions on their faces. Will decided to break the awkward silence.

"Yeah, Chris is weird and yet we keep him around for some reason," Will said. Mike and Richie chuckled while Chris glared at Will for a moment before responding.

"Because I love my friends and family and y'all would flip if I wasn't there to cause headaches for you."

All four of them laughed for several seconds before Richie spoke again.

"What about you, Willie Will?"

Will's face lit up in fear. Chris immediately turned to him and grabbed onto his hand, hoping to reassure his cousin. Will was taking several deep breaths to calm himself down. Chris looked over at Richie.

"You guys aren't homophobic or anything are you?" he demanded, staring daggers at the twins.

"No!" Mike exclaimed.

"Of course not!" said Richie. "It's kinda hard to be when you're bisexual."

At this casual revelation, Will looked over at Richie, all panic seeming to vanish from him.

"You're bi?" asked Will.

Richie nodded.

"I've dated boys and girls, but I haven't found anyone yet to catch my eye in Hawkins," Richie said with a grin. "I'll let you know when I do, Willie Will."

Will finally smiled again and Chris let go of his hand, satisfied that Will had recovered from his brief panic attack.

"Well, I guess since I'm in good company, you'll have no problem with me telling you that I'm gay," said Will.

"Nope, no problem at all!" said Richie.

"Really? That's pretty brave to admit, even if gay marriage got legalized earlier this year," said Mike, looking at Will as if he were looking at a hero.

"It's just another part of me," said Will with a shrug.

"So are you dating anyone, Willie Will?"

"No," Will said, shaking his head. "I was in a relationship last year with someone, but it ended badly, so I'm swearing off of dating for a bit, but not like Chris. I just wanna avoid some heartbreak for a while and focus on me."

Mike's eyes seemed to drop slightly at this. Chris noticed it immediately, but Will was oblivious to it as he turned to Mike.

"How about you, Mike? Everyone else has spoken."

"Um...I don't know if I'm gay or bi. I mean, I did date a girl for a little while a year ago summer, but I've also been in a relationship with a boy. That one was the serious one, but I guess I don't know if I'm gay or bi."

Chris gave Mike a somewhat pitying look as he asked his next question.

"Who'd you date?"

Now it was Mike and Richie's turn to exchange a look. Richie looked at Mike with concern in his eyes while all emotion seemed to

disappear from Mike's face.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to pry or anything," Chris said as Will slapped him on the arm again, this time harder.

"It's not your fault," Mike said in a whisper before he stood up. "Um, can you guys excuse me a minute? I'm gonna go to the bathroom."

Mike didn't wait for an answer as he hurriedly walked away from the table. Chris stood up to follow him, but Richie held up a hand.

"Just give him a minute," Richie said. Chris nodded at him and sat down again. "He just needs to calm down."

"I'm sorry," Chris repeated. "I didn't mean to upset him."

"It's not your fault," Richie said kindly. "It's just...that's a hard topic for Mike to talk about."

"What happened?" Will asked.

"I really shouldn't say. It's not my place to. I'll just say that something happened to the boy Mike was dating and it wasn't good. Mike blames himself for what happened. He was thinking about it earlier and I had to calm him down before we came."

"Oh my god," said Chris, burying his head in his hands in shame. "I shouldn't have said anything!"

"Hey, it's okay, Chris," Richie said, reaching across the small table and grabbing onto one of Chris' arms. "Really, it's okay. Mike's not upset with you or anything, I promise. It's just hard for him."

Chris nodded at Richie as he sat up again.

"Just please, don't ask Mike about it," Richie pleaded. "It's a tough subject for him to talk about with anyone who's not family. Hell, it's hard for me too. I was good friends with Mike's boyfriend. But please, you guys, promise me that you'll respect Mike and not bring it up unless he does it first."

Chris nodded vigorously.

"Of course," said Will. "We don't want to upset him or anything."

"Thanks guys," Richie said as Mike walked back to the table and sat down. It looked like he had been crying, but he had cleaned his face in an attempt to hide it.

"I'm sorry, Mike," Chris said.

Mike shook his head.

"No, it's okay, Chris," he said, giving Chris a weak smile. "It just came up in conversation."

"Still, I didn't mean to upset you or anything."

"You didn't, I promise," Mike said, reaching across the table and putting his hand on Chris' wrist. "Really, it's okay."

Chris nodded and smiled at Mike.

"Hey, listen, we were gonna ask you guys about something," Will said as a way of changing the subject.

"That's right," Chris said, grateful for the topic change. "Since Halloween is next week and you guys are new in town, we thought we'd invite you and your family to my parent's Halloween party."

"Hell yeah!" Richie said, back to his usual excited self. "I love a good Halloween party and I know Mike and Ike does too!"

Mike grinned slightly.

"It is my favorite holiday," he said quietly.

"Well then you guys should totally come!" Will said, matching Richie's excitement.

"Where's it at?" Richie asked.

"It'll be at my house in the backyard. We usually invite over all of the party and their families, and a few of my parent's friends. We have a grill out and potluck dinner with lots and lots of food and then we

watch horror movies on the outdoor projector my Dad and Will's step dad set up."

"That's fucking awesome!" said Richie. "What movies do you watch?"

"It usually changes from year to year," said Chris. "But this year, we're going with a *Scream*-a-thon, all four *Scream* movies back to back under the stars. And since Halloween is on a Saturday this year, we should be able to watch all of them! We usually start around 4 in the afternoon with getting all the food ready and usually we watch the first movie and everyone eats before we watch the other movies."

"We'd love to come," said Mike, smiling his true smile again. "Is it okay if we dress up?"

"Mike and Ike, it wouldn't be a Halloween party without costumes!"

Chris grinned.

"Of course, it's practically expected that you'll wear costumes, but don't tell anyone what you're wearing, we like to be surprised when everyone shows up."

"Hell yeah!" said Richie. "Do you need us to bring anything? Our mom is a great cook and she can whip up whatever you need her to."

"If she can bring a large dessert, that would be great," said Chris. "Oh, and you guys would be welcome to stay the night if you'd like. The whole party usually sleeps over when we do these nights and a lot of the adults camp out under the stars since the party usually goes pretty late."

"Oh yeah, we're in!" said Richie.

Chris beamed at him as he and Will turned to Mike.

"We'll be there," Mike said with a grin.

3. Game and A Party

Chris marched in time to the beat of the cadence as the rest of the marching band filed into the football stadium. It was the evening before Halloween and the final football game of the season had been scheduled for this night. The Hawkins High School Marching band consisted of about 120 students, all of whom were dressed in the standard navy blue band uniform that looked as if they came straight from the Civil War.

As the rest of the band members stopped marching in front of him, Chris stopped too, his stepping still in time with the cadence as those behind him slowed and came to a stop as well. Finally, Mr. Linville, the band director, raised a fist to signal to the percussion players to finish playing the cadence.

Finally, the cadence finished and the crowd that had started to gather for the game cheered for the band. Chris turned his head slightly and could see the party sitting in the stands, cheering loudly than the rest, along with his parents, and Joyce and Jim.

"Dismissed!" Mr. Linville called.

As one, the band members split from their formation and made their way to the stands. The band took up the left quarter of the stands on its own and friends and family usually sat with them. Chris hurried up the stairs and reached the party, grinning at all of them. It wasn't until he looked up at his parents that he realized there were two more familiar faces sitting with them.

"Jonathan! Steve!" Chris exclaimed as the two college roommates stood up. Chris hurried around the party and hugged Jonathan first, beaming. "What are you guys doing here?"

"We had to come, buddy!" Jonathan. "It sucks only getting to watch you and El perform on the Facebook livestream! Seeing you in person will be much more fun!"

"And besides, we are not missing the Halloween party tomorrow," added Steve as he gave Chris a hug, too. Chris grinned at him.

"Well, it's good to see you have your priorities in line as always, Steve," Chris said as he sat down. Most of the party had already wrapped themselves into some blankets, except for Richie and Will.

"Damn, that uniform looks intense," said Richie as Chris took off his hat and set it down, and stuck his trumpet inside it with the bell facedown.

"Yeah, it can be ridiculous when it's warm out, but it's nice when the weather is cooler like this. And I notice you don't have a blanket, Richie, cold not bother you that much?"

"Nah," said Richie shaking his head. "I've had worse, though I may change my mind when it gets dark in a bit."

"Luckily you have my personal heater sitting next you," said Will as Chris wrapped an arm around him and Will scooted closer to him.

"Personal heater?" asked Richie, his goofy grin causing Chris to smile, too.

"Yeah, Will thinks that I radiate heat whenever I wear my band uniform, so we always sit together and snuggle up during games."

"He's way better than any blanket!" Will exclaimed. Chris smiled at him.

"Well, if I get cold later, I wouldn't mind testing out this personal heater," said Richie.

"Yeah sure," said Chris with a nod.

Midway through the second quarter of the game, Mr. Linville started to dismiss band members by section from the stands in order to get onto the field for the halftime show. When the trumpets were called, Chris picked up his instrument and put on his hat. He turned to Will.

"How do I look?" Chris asked.

"Here, I'll fix it," Will, standing up and adjusting Chris' hat for him. "There, now you're not crooked. Have a great show, but hurry back so

I don't freeze!"

"Yeah, yeah," Chris said.

"Good luck, honey!" said Pearl, Chris' mother. "We'll be cheering the loudest!"

Chris smiled at her and blew her a kiss before he headed down the stairs with the rest of the trumpet players in the band.

About 15 minutes later, Chris stood on the edge of the football field with the rest of the marching band. He took several deep breaths, feeling a little nervous with this being the final football game of the year and with everyone there to watch him perform. Soon, the two drum majors called the band to attention and counted off the percussion section for the cadence.

Chris listened as he marched across the field to his opening position as the commentator announced the show.

"On Wednesday, the Hawkins High School Marching Band competed at the Northern Plains Marching Festival here at District Stadium. The band earned straight first division ratings, for its 20th consecutive performance with the top results."

At this, the audience cheered loudly. Chris couldn't help but grin as their enthusiasm and could swear he could hear the party cheering loudly over the rest of the crowd.

"Tonight, the band presents its Music of Chicago halftime show. They will perform *25 or 6 to 4*, *Saturday in the Park* and *Hard to Say I'm Sorry/Getaway*, featuring a trumpet solo from sophomore Chris Byers."

Cheers erupted again at Chris' name and Chris was sure he heard Richie loudly shout his name, rolling the Rs as he always did. Suddenly, Chris felt a lot less nervous than he had been.

Much faster than he expected, it was time for the final song, where Chris had a solo near the beginning. He stepped out of his place at the end of the *Saturday in the Park* performance and walked to the front of the marching field. Once he was situated, Chris nodded at the

drum major to his left, who counted the band off and everyone raised their instruments, except for Chris, who remained still.

The band performed the opening notes of the song, which were akin to the actual opening notes of *Hard to Say I'm Sorry*. As soon as they were done, Chris lifted his trumpet to his mouth and started to play his solo, which mirrored the song's opening lyrics:

"Everybody needs a little time away,"

I heard her say,

"From each other."

"Even lover's needs a holiday, far away from each other."

Once he was done, Chris lowered his trumpet, took a small bow and turned to hurry back to his spot in the band's formation as the audience erupted in cheers again. Over the rest of the crowd, Chris distinctly heard a familiar voice.

"Yeah, go Chris!" it said, rolling the Rs.

Chris grinned as he took his place and continued marching with the rest of the band. Within moments, the song was over and everyone lowered their instruments, shouting, "Horns down!" as they did. The audience applauded them loudly again.

"Ladies and gentleman, the Hawkins High School Marching Band!" the commentator shouted into the mic.

If it were possible, the audience's cheering got louder at this as the drum majors counted off for the cadence. As one unit, the band marched to the front of the football field and toward the stands, eventually all taking a knee at the edge of the stands as the dance team walked onto the field.

"And now, ladies and gentleman, please welcome the Hawkins-ettes!"

Chris rolled his eyes at the absurd name for the dance team, but cheered loudly for El, who stood near the center of the dance team that numbered about a dozen. The dance team performed a medley to

some Spice Girls music, namely portions of *Wannabe* and *Spice Up Your Life*. When they were done, the audience cheered enthusiastically for them and the team exited the field as well.

As soon as El reached him, Chris pulled her into a hug, beaming.

"You were fantastic!" he exclaimed.

"Was I?" El asked, looking slightly stressed. "I thought I was overdoing it during the chorus of *Spice Up Your Life* so I tried to pull it back a little and..."

"El, would you relax?" Chris interrupted with a slight eye roll. "You looked great out there. There's no such thing as overdoing it. You looked so happy out there dancing, especially to that music. I know you and the Spice Girls."

El smiled at him as they walked up the stands toward the party and their families, who were all clapping loudly for them.

"Great show, you two!" Joyce exclaimed as she pulled El into a hug.

"I loved that solo!" said Pearl, beaming at Chris, who smiled back at her. "You both were so good out there!"

"Yeah, it was way more fun seeing you live than on Facebook!" said Jonathan.

Chris chuckled as he put his hat on the ground again along with his trumpet.

"Now, sit back down so you can warm me up!" Will demanded with a laugh. Chris rolled his eyes and sat down next to Will, who wrapped both of his arms around Chris' left arm and scooted closer. "Much better," he said.

Chris turned to Richie, who had been smiling at him for the last several seconds.

"Um...can I get a personal heater too?" he asked nervously, the smile fading from his face just a little bit.

"Of course!" Chris replied happily, opening his right arm so Richie could scoot closer to him. Richie leaned into Chris, who wrapped an arm around Richie. Chris was surprised that he felt comfortable enough with Richie to do this; normally his snuggling was reserved just for his oldest friends in the party and not somebody who was a relative stranger by comparison.

"Oh my god you're practically on fire!" Richie exclaimed, blushing slightly. "How do you do that?"

Chris chuckled. "I guess it's just the band uniform. I'm always super warm in it. Honestly, I'm surprised even this weather is enough for me to leave the whole thing on. I usually lose my jacket after halftime since I don't need it anymore."

"You'd better not!" Will said, looking cross for a moment before he grinned at Chris.

"All right, all right, I won't," Chris said sheepishly as he turned and saw his parents starting to walk down the stairs to the bottom of the stands.

"Great show, honey, but I'd better get back to the station for the 10:00 show," Pearl said, looking sad.

"Now worries, Ma, I'll see you after the show. Hey! Before you go, can you get a group picture of the whole party?"

"Sure, honey!"

Chris tossed his phone to his dad, who managed to catch it before handing it to Pearl.

"Great catch, Dad!" said Chris as Will was nudging everyone to look ahead at Pearl. "Didn't think you'd see that one coming!"

"You'll have to be faster than that, son," Dale said with a smirk.

Chris laughed as he looked to his left to make sure the rest of the party was paying attention. Once satisfied, he turned to face his mom, who was adjusting the camera.

"All right everyone, squeeze in like you like each other!" Pearl ordered.

Everyone scooted into each other so there was not an inch of space between them. They all smiled at the camera as Pearl took a handful of pictures. When she was done, she looked at them on Chris' phone.

"Looks great!" she said, handing the phone to Dale, who promptly chucked it at Chris, who nearly dropped the phone in surprise. Dale chuckled as Chris glared at him. "All right, kids, it's back to the station for me, but I'll see you all tomorrow afternoon for the Halloween party!"

"Bye Mom!" Chris called as the rest of the party shouted their goodbyes, too.

Chris unlocked his phone at 11:17, about an hour after getting home from the game. He was lying in his bed with the lights off in his room. He looked through the photos his mother had taken at the game. Once he had found the best one of the bunch, Chris opened the Instagram app on his phone and uploaded the photo, with the caption, "Great Friday night with these losers. Love you guys." He also put a heart emoji in the caption before he posted the photo to Instagram and to his Facebook and Twitter pages.

For the next several moments, Chris flipped through the rest of his Instagram feed, ignoring the notifications he was seeing come in on the photo until he was done looking at the rest of the photos and videos on his feed. Finally, Chris clicked the heart button to see the notifications, which were all from the photo he had uploaded.

Max and El had both liked the picture and left kissing emojis as comments, while all of the boys, including Mike and Richie, had liked the picture as well. So far, only Dustin, Lucas and Will had commented on it.

Dustin: Fun night! See ya tomorrow!

Lucas: Damn, me and Max look hot! The rest of y'all look okay too.

Will: Thanks for being the best personal heater ever. Love you, cousin!

Will had also left a heart emoji, which Chris grinned at before he noticed Richie leave a comment, too.

Richie: You were great tonight! I had a lot of fun hanging out with all of you. Thanks for letting Mike and Ike and I tag along and sit with you. And thanks for letting me use your personal heater, Will. And thanks for all of you for being such good friends to us. Love you guys!

Chris put his hand to his mouth after he read Richie's comment, as if he were trying to prevent himself from crying. Richie felt like part of the group; he already felt platonic love to everyone in the party. Chris smiled to himself, feeling a level of protectiveness and love fill him up. He knew it had to do with Richie and Mike, and he knew that he wanted to do whatever it took to make sure they were happy and safe, just as he did with everyone else in the party.

Chris hurried the front door when he heard knocking. He opened it and nearly fell over laughing when he saw Will and El in costume.

"Oh my god, Luke and Leia!" he exclaimed as Will and El got their first look at Chris' costume, too.

"And who are you supposed to be?" Will asked with a grin as he and El stepped into house, followed by Joyce, Jim, Jonathan and Steve.

"Just a generic Jedi, nobody in particular," Chris replied with a grin as he looked over at Jim and Joyce. "No matching costumes this year, you two?"

"Jim couldn't be bothered to find something that matched," Joyce said, adjusting her witch hat slightly.

"It's not that, this was just cheaper," Jim said sheepishly as he fixed the stethoscope around his neck.

Joyce rolled her eyes while the kids all laughed and followed Chris into the kitchen, where Dale and Pearl were getting the food ready for the evening. Chris looked over at Steve, who was wearing a black

trench jacket and had sunglasses on. His hair was parted up in an unusual way.

"Wesker?" Chris asked after several moments.

"At your service, mere human," Steve said in low-pitched English accent that was a passable imitation of Wesker in Resident Evil 5.

"Well, just make sure you can actually dodge bullets in case the projector goes out and Dad has a aneurysm and wants to shoot someone," Chris said as Jonathan grinned at him.

"Meanwhile, I'm playing John Marston," Jonathan said, raising his cowboy hat in greeting.

"The original version or the one in the zombie expansion?" El asked.

"Zombie expansion of course," Jonathan scoffed. "It's Halloween, after all."

Everyone laughed as the doorbell rang again. Chris hurried to it, but was beat by a small shih tzu, who was wagging her tail madly and pawing at the door.

"Easy, baby girl," Chris said, bending down and picking her up before he opened the door. Mike and Richie were standing in the doorway along with a younger girl and a woman Chris assumed was their mom.

"Wow, you guys look great!"

"Yeah baby, it's very groovy!" Richie said in a perfect imitation of Austin Powers.

"Is that handmade?" Chris asked as he gestured for everyone to come inside. "And don't mind Sophie here, she'll calm down in a second and then I'll let her come say hi to you."

"Yep!" said Richie happily. "We went to a couple of Goodwills and found all the pieces. It's very shagadelic, baby, yeah!"

Chris grinned as he turned to Mike.

"Turn to page 394, Mr. Potter," Chris said in his best Professor Snape voice.

"That was pretty good," Mike said with a smile. "You do voices a lot?"

"Yeah, especially when Will needs help running lines. I usually do them in voices to help him remember where he is in the story. I'm sorry," Chris added, exasperated, looking at Mike and Richie's mom. "Where are my manners? I'm Chris Byers, let me take that dessert tray from you."

"Thank you, Chris. I'm Karen Wheeler," she said with a smile. "You have a lovely home."

"Thank you, ma'am," Chris said as he took the tray from her. "And thank you for bringing this dessert. I know Mom and Dad really appreciate it. Come on into the kitchen and I'll introduce all of you."

Chris led them into the kitchen and introduced Karen to his parents. The adults started fussing around with all of the food in the kitchen, so Chris hurried away with Mike and Richie and walked to the backyard, where Will and El were waiting with them.

"Wow, this looks fantastic," Mike said breathlessly, glancing around at his surroundings. "You have the party out here?"

Chris nodded.

"Yep, we have the screen over there," Chris said, pointing at it. "And everyone kinda gathers around in front of it with lawn chairs and we play the movies. Dad and I already set it up earlier so he and Mom could change into their costumes."

"Who are they supposed to be?" Mike asked. "I only saw part of their costumes."

Chris rolled his eyes slightly.

"Dad is being a hippie because apparently we're back in the 60s, and Mom decided to be Mrs. Voorhees from *Friday the 13th*. I guess they wanted to be polar opposites."

They all laughed at the costume choice before El started to tug at Will's arm.

"Come on, I'm thirsty," she said. "Is the punch set up, Chris?"

"Yeah, it's where it always is," Chris replied with a grin as El dragged Will toward the punch and Mike followed them. Chris put down Sophie the shih tzu, who promptly hurried after the others, wagging her tail madly. Chris turned to Richie and pulled him into a brief hug. Richie was taken aback by this, but smiled nonetheless.

"What was that for?" Richie asked when Chris broke the hug apart.

"I just wanted to say thanks for what you said last night on Instagram. You were the only one who actually complimented me on the halftime show. And I won't lie, I could hear you over everyone else cheering and it kinda helped me get through my solo."

Richie beamed at him.

"Wow, Chris, that means a lot."

"Hey, when you're a good friend to me, I like to give credit."

Over the next half hour, the rest of the party arrived with their family members. Everyone was in costume and had gone all out for the party. Dustin was dressed as Han Solo, Max wore a Union Jack Dress and carried a microphone, looking like a teenaged Ginger Spice, while Lucas wore a black suit with a name tag that said "Agent J" on it.

Soon, the first Scream movie was playing on the projector and everyone had gathered around the screen with plates of food and were laughing and screaming at the various events in the movie. Midway through the second film, Chris joined Will in the kitchen, where the two worked on making milkshakes for everyone, a tradition of the Halloween party. Just as they were finishing, Mike walked into the kitchen.

"Hey guys, what's up?" he asked.

"We're just making milkshakes for everyone," Will said with a smile.

"Would you like one?"

"Yeah, sure," Mike said with a grin. "I'll take one."

Will handed a milkshake over, which Mike took and gave Will a warm smile, causing Will to blush slightly. Chris saw this and lightly nudged Will in the shoulder, but Will ignored him.

"So, Mike, you having a good time? I hope this party lives up to others you had back in Kansas!" said Chris.

Mike shrugged.

"I'm definitely having a good time, but I wouldn't know about other parties. I basically haven't been to a party that wasn't for a birthday."

"Why's that?" asked Will.

"I guess it has to do with my best friend Charlie," Mike said, hesitating slightly. He looked at Chris and Will, who both nodded, inviting him to continue. Mike took a breath. "He had an alcoholic father, so he hated going to parties of any kind."

"Oh man, that sucks," said Chris.

"And where is Charlie tonight? Back in Kansas?" Will asked.

"Oh no, he shot himself last May," Mike said nonchalantly.

Both Chris and Will froze, looking up at Mike with shock etched onto their faces. Mike looked back at them with a blank expression on his face before he shrugged.

"I kinda wish he had left a note, you know?" Mike asked.

Will and Chris simply stared back at Mike, both at a loss for words. Mike didn't seem to be surprised by this, but his facial expression changed slightly.

"Hey, Chris, where's the bathroom?"

"It's...uh..." Chris stammered before he cleared his throat. "It's just

down the hall and to the left."

"Thanks Chris, you're a good friend," Mike said as he walked away and headed to the bathroom. Chris and Will watched him go, both of them looking like they were going to cry.

"Are y'all shagging in here or something?" Richie asked in his Austin Powers voice as he walked inside the kitchen. "I mean it'll help keep you warm and everything, but..."

Richie stopped when he saw the looks on Chris and Will's faces.

"What's going on, guys?" he asked in his normal voice, looking concerned.

Will and Chris glanced at each other, neither of them sure how to answer the question. Finally, Chris spoke up.

"Mike just told us what happened to Charlie."

Richie's face darkened. All happiness seemed to vanish from it and he now looked incredibly sad, sadder than Chris or Will thought was possible for someone as bubbly as Richie. Richie sighed deeply.

"I guess you guys now know why Mike doesn't like to talk about his boyfriend," he said quietly.

Will and Chris exchanged a glance again. That was news to them.

"He, uh...he didn't tell us that part of it," Will admitted, sounding ashamed. "He just told us that Charlie shot himself."

"Yeah, he usually just describes Charlie as his best friend, but that's the boy Mike was dating back home. Listen, guys, I should go and check on him."

"No, I'll go," Will said, straightening up and walking out of the living room. "Maybe he just needs a friend right now, a friend who doesn't know much. Maybe that'll help."

"Okay," Richie said with a nod as Will walked out of the kitchen and toward the bathroom where Mike had gone. Richie turned to Chris,

who walked over to him and motioned for Richie to sit down on the barstools with him.

"Mike talked to him, you know. The night that Charlie died."

"He did?"

"Yeah. Charlie tried to tell him how he was feeling, but Mike didn't understand what he meant, so Charlie told him to drop and just to leave. A few hours later, our Mom woke us up and told us what had happened. That's why Mike blames himself for Charlie dying. Hell, I do, too. He was my best friend and I couldn't see how much he..." At this, Richie's voice started to break and tears started to roll down his face. "I couldn't see how much he was hurting."

Richie dissolved into tears. Chris scooted closer to Richie and wrapped his arms around the other boy, who seemed grateful for the contact as he leaned into Chris' chest, holding on to Chris as though he was a lifeline.

Will waited at the end of the hallway for Mike to come out of the bathroom. When Mike came out, though, he didn't go back the way he came. Instead, Will watched Mike walk into one of spare bedrooms that was on the first floor. Will slowly followed Mike and opened the door slightly. Mike was sitting on the bed with a tearful expression on his face. Will sighed and walked into the room. Mike didn't look up until Will sat on the bed next to him.

"Oh, hey," Mike said quietly.

"Hi," Will said. "I'm sorry if I'm disturbing you. I can leave if you want."

"No, please stay," Mike said, grabbing onto Will's arm to stop him from moving.

"I'm not going anywhere, Mike," Will said kindly as he tried to give Mike a smile. "I just want you to know that I'm here for you, to help you with this however I can. I know we don't know each other that well, but I do think of you as a friend, Mike. And I wanna help you if

you want me to."

Mike considered Will for a moment. He knew his feelings for the boy next to him were somewhat romantic, but he didn't want to let himself feel that way, at least not yet. Will gave Mike another smile and put one of his hands on top of Mike's. Mike instantly felt himself warm up and suddenly felt like he was safe.

"Just be here, Will," Mike said with a sigh as he lay his head on Will's shoulder. "Your friendship and kindness are enough for now."

4. Christmas Surprises

Everyone in the Party had their heads buried in their notebooks and textbooks, cramming as much information into their minds as they could in preparation for final exams. They were crowded in Chris' living room, all sitting and lying in various states with all of their studying materials littering the floors. They had been at it for about two hours when Max stood up, stretching.

"Damn, they really know how to get us to freak out over finals," she said grumpily. "What time is it, anyway?"

"It's just after 8," Will said, glancing at his watch.

"Shit, I'd better get home," Max replied, starting to pack up her supplies. "I promised my Mom I'd help her bake cookies and I'm sure she's already started." Max glanced at her phone. "And she has," she said as confirmation.

"Yeah, I better get going too," said Lucas, rubbing his eyes. "I still have my English paper to type."

"Hey, before you guys start leaving, I've got a surprise for all of you," said Chris.

Everyone perked up, though nobody matched Richie's level of enthusiasm. He practically threw his book away as he looked up at Chris, his eyes lit with excitement. Chris grinned at him.

"What? I love surprises!" Richie said indignantly as Mike glared at him.

"Well, I think you'll love this one, Richie," Chris said. "So, you guys know how I got that job at the movie theatre a few weeks ago?"

Everyone nodded. Chris had gotten the job at the beginning of November, just after Halloween, and usually worked at the theatre on the weekends, mainly as a greeter as people walked to the screening rooms.

"They obviously let employees get first dibs on tickets, and even

though ticket sales started selling back in October, there are still plenty of seats left for *The Force Awakens*, at least for the 8:00 show."

The Party stared at Chris intently. Both Richie and Mike seemed to be holding their breath; everyone knew they were the biggest Star Wars fans of the group, even more so than Chris, who had been a fan of the films since he was three years old.

"And since premiere night is the same day as we finish finals, I thought, 'What better way to celebrate the end of the semester than with tickets to see the movie on opening night?'"

As he finished talking, Chris whipped out the movie tickets from his pocket and beamed at everyone else. The rest of the Party sat stunned for a few moments before Mike spoke up.

"Are you serious?" he asked, not daring to believe it.

"Hell yes I'm serious!" Chris replied. "I got the tickets as soon as I was able to and I've been waiting until it was a little closer to tell you all. We're going on opening night!"

"Oh my god, I love you," said Richie, hurrying over to Chris and snatching a ticket for himself and looking at it with pure glee.

Chris chuckled.

"The feeling is mutual, my friend," he said playfully. "So yeah, we'll go and see the movie on opening night and since we'll show up early, we should be able to get pretty good seats."

"How early are we talking?" asked El. "If I can, I'm getting in a nap before we go."

"I'd say we should probably show up around 5 or so. I know our showing doesn't start til 8, but they're saying on the news this is the most anticipated movie of the year, so it's bound to be packed. Hell, I know some of the earlier screenings sold out super quick, but the 8:00 show we're seeing still has some openings, which is how I was able to get these."

"Man, you're the best friend ever, Chris!" Dustin exclaimed, taking his

own ticket and looking at it. I mean, no offense to the rest of you, but none of you got all of us tickets to opening night!"

Everyone laughed.

"Boy you weren't kidding, Chris," Will said as they walked into the theatre. A large line snaked around the entire right side of the building, with several people dressed as Star Wars characters.

"Told you so," Chris said triumphantly. "I knew this joint would be packed tonight."

"Fine, you win," said Max irritably, though she was smiling. "I guess we really did have to show up three hours before our movie begins."

"Hey, on the plus side, you guys can use my discount to buy food!" Chris said.

"Have I mentioned that you're the greatest friend ever?" asked Dustin with a big goofy grin on his face.

"Once or twice," said Chris.

"All right, let's get inside before we all freeze to death out here," said El impatiently. She was dressed in her Leia costume from Halloween and it did her no favors on keeping warm.

Once inside, Chris led them over to the line for the 8:00 show. Thanks to his planning ahead, they were the first in line for the screening. They were told seating would begin at 6:00, so each of them took turns going to the concession stand with Chris to get something to eat while they waited. After what seemed an eternity, the usher finally stepped aside to let them hand over their tickets and head to the screening room.

Since they were the first to enter the screening room, they were able to get the best seats in the room: in the back row of the theatre and near the center. They had all agreed to let Chris sit in the center since he had bought the tickets for everyone, despite Chris insisting that someone else sit in the center. It took Max glaring at him for several seconds before Chris finally relented and agreed to sit in the middle,

if only to get her to stop staring at him.

"So, any predictions?" Will asked Chris excitedly.

"Well, I don't really go into movies with expectations, but I have a feeling I'm gonna be entertained, regardless. I mean, this is the first time I've seen Luke, Han and Leia on the big screen; I never got to see the originals in theatres. But I do think Han is gonna be one of the main characters."

"How did you figure that?" asked Richie from Chris' left.

"Well, he's the one who was in the trailers more than the others. I mean, Luke didn't even appear in them at all, except for that voiceover in the second teaser, so I think his role is gonna be small, but important. And we only saw Leia for a single shot in the full trailer..."

"Which was the biggest crime against humanity ever," Max interjected.

"You're telling me," said Chris, nodding. "Leia was the only princess I ever had a crush on as a kid, so to only have her in that one shot of the trailer made me feel cheated."

"What about Artoo and Threepio?" asked Dustin.

"They're gonna be there," Mike insisted. "But I think they really want that BB-8 thing to be the new droid focus."

"Yeah, but you can't ever beat R2-D2," said Lucas. "He's basically been saying, 'Here, hold my beer' during the whole franchise, so he better be there!"

"I just hope Threepio kills a moment between Han and Leia again," El said with a smirk. "When he does that for their first kiss in *Empire*, I die laughing every time."

"But what about the new characters?" asked Chris. "How does that stormtrooper end up with Anakin and Luke's lightsaber and where did it come from? I thought it was gone when Vader sliced off Luke's hand."

"I think someone found it and has been holding it," said Will. "I don't know how they got it, but I think they've been keeping it safe until the moment is right. And I have a feeling that girl, what's her name?"

"Rey," said El with a look that she was personally offended that Will didn't know the character's name.

"Yeah, Rey. I have a feeling she's gonna end up being a Jedi or something. They've focused a lot of her in the trailers and I've read a bunch of theories that she's the star."

"Well that would be refreshing," said Max with a smirk. "It's about time they have a Star Wars movie where the main character is a woman. Don't get me wrong, I love Leia and Padme, but if they were the leads in those movies, half the shit that happened wouldn't have."

And so they continued discussing the film for the next two hours, each of them with their own guesses and speculations as to what was happening. At one point, they took a selfie with the selfie stick Lucas had brought with them; since there were so many of them, it was next to impossible for someone to hold a phone and get a picture of them.

Finally, after what seemed an eternity, an automated voice started speaking, advertising upcoming movies and specials that would be playing for the holiday season at the theatre. Within moments, though, the curtain in front of the screen started to rise and everyone in the theatre cheered loudly.

"And now, the moment you've all been waiting for: please sit back, relax and enjoy *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* as we return to a galaxy far, far away for another adventure in the stars," said the automated voice.

Throughout the movie, the Party laughed and cheered as they saw new and old faces and cried when they saw one of their most beloved characters killed. Nevertheless, all of them were beaming at the end of the movie.

"That's it, I'm suing Kylo Ren for killing Han," said Dustin determinedly.

"Hey, if anyone is able to defeat Han, it had to be his flesh and blood," Lucas piped up.

"I freaking love Rey," said El. "She's my new queen, along with Leia."

"Can we talk about BB-8, though?" said Max. "Like, seriously, he's the cutest little droid ever and he's funny as hell."

"I still wanna know how Poe survived that crash landing," said Mike.

"The Force was strong with him, Mike and Ike!" Richie exclaimed.

"I'm a little sad we didn't see much of Luke, but I have a feeling he'll have a big role in the next movie," said Will.

"Yeah, it's gonna be a long two years to wait for that," Chris said, beaming. "I just can't believe how good of a movie that was! That's the Star Wars film I wanted when I saw the prequels!"

Chris and Will walked into the living room, carrying two trays of coffee mugs on them. The rest of the party was waiting for them, dressed in ugly Christmas sweaters.

"Okay, everyone, here's the famous Byers hot chocolate," said Will as he set down his tray on the coffee table. Chris imitated him.

Mike was the first one to grab a coffee mug and take a sip.

"Oh my god this is amazing!" he exclaimed. "I've never hot chocolate that tastes this good!"

Will beamed at him as Richie took a sip from his mug.

"Holy shit, my taste buds are in heaven!"

Chris laughed at him.

"What's in it?" Richie asked.

"That is a Byers family secret," said Chris with a serious expression on his face. "We'll never tell what the secret ingredient is. Basically, you

have to marry into the family if you're not born into it."

"Shit, I should marry you just to get the ingredient," said Richie with a grin. Chris attempted to smile at him, but it came out as a grimace instead and he just nodded at Richie.

"All right, guys, so we have the famous hot chocolate, which means we can start the Secret Santa. And since Will is the youngest..."

"Only by four days!" Will interjected, glaring at Chris for a second before he smiled.

"Still the youngest, dear cousin. So, since Will is the youngest, he gets to go first. So he'll guess who his Secret Santa was and then whoever his Secret Santa was will open their gift and so on."

Will nodded and took a sip of his hot chocolate before he picked up the gift with his name on it. He shook it briefly to try and figure out what it was before he tore the wrapping paper. He pulled out a sketchbook.

"Wow," Will said breathlessly.

"What is it?" asked El, glancing over Dustin's head to get a better look at the gift.

"It's a sketchbook with a custom cover on it," Will said, turning the book around to show the rest of the party. The picture from the final football game of the year was on it. "This is incredible. I love it!"

"So, who do you think your Secret Santa is?" asked Max, sounding slightly impatient.

"Ummmm...I'm gonna guess Chris?" said Will, sounding uncertain.

"Nope, sorry, buddy," Chris said, shaking his head. "Though I must say that is something that I would totally have gotten for you."

"Uh, I have no idea who then."

"It's me," said Mike, blushing slightly.

"Mike?" Will said, like he couldn't believe it.

"Yeah," said Mike, looking away as if embarrassed. "I know how much you love drawing, so I thought you could have a custom book and draw stuff for us, or I don't know...it's kinda awkward."

"No, I love it, Mike!" Will stood up and walked over to Mike, pulling him into a hug. "Thank you; this is a wonderful gift!"

Mike smiled at Will.

"I'm glad you like it," he said shyly.

"All right, Mike and Ike, it's your turn!" said Richie.

"Don't call me that," Mike said irritably as he opened the square-looking package that was his. "Whoa," he said, impressed with his gift: a Blu Ray set of the first six Star Wars movies. "I've been wanting this set for a while, but it was always too expensive! Uhhh...I'll guess, El?"

"Sorry, Mike, it was me," said Dustin, smiling at Mike triumphantly.

"This had to go over our price limit!" Mike said incredulously.

"Nah, I got a discount on it," Dustin replied, shaking his head. "My Mom works at Target and she gets a nice discount on everything, so I was able to get it in the price range. Now, I guess it's my turn."

Dustin's gift was rectangular shaped. He opened it rather quickly and started laughing as soon as he saw what was inside.

"Oh my god, an R2-D2 coffee press!" he exclaimed.

He turned the coffee press around so everyone could see it and everyone started laughing.

"That is freaking amazing!" Dustin said. "And since it's a gift that's totally me, I'm gonna say that Lucas got it for me!"

"Yep!" Lucas said happily as he picked up his own gift and opened it. "Oooh, Michael Jordan's basketball autobiography. Well, since I've

only told one person about it, I'm gonna guess it was Max!"

"Got that right," Max said as she leaned in to give Lucas a kiss on the cheek. Dustin and El mimed vomiting. Max glared at them with daggers in her eyes before she turned to her own present.

"Oh my god, a vinyl collection of Beatles albums!" Max exclaimed. "I've always wanted these! There are some classics here: 'Let it Be,' 'Yellow Submarine,' 'The White Album' damn, someone went all out. Uh...I'll guess, El?"

El shook her head.

"No, but now I might have to rethink your real gift," El said, grinning slightly. "Good thing I have four days until Christmas."

"And I'll be in Cali this time tomorrow anyway so really you have a few extra days," said Max with a smile.

"It was me!" Will said excitedly.

"You are my new favorite, Will!" Max said fondly as she walked over to Will and hugged him.

"Okay, since Will has already opened his gift, he gets to pick the next person," said Chris.

"Richie, you go," said Will.

Richie didn't hesitate and immediately tore the wrapping paper off his gift. He pulled out a blue scarf. Richie quickly wrapped the scarf around his neck, beaming.

"It's perfect!" he exclaimed. "Um, I guess I only have two people to pick from, so I'm gonna guess Chris?"

Chris shook his head.

"Yep, it was me," El said, smiling at Richie. "As soon as I saw it, I thought of you, Richie."

"I love it, El, thanks!"

"Of course!"

El then opened her gift, which was a new set of dancing shoes. Unlike the pair she had worn down during the fall on the dance team, these were nice and shiny and looked like they were brand new.

"Ooooh, these will work great!" El said. "Uh, Richie, did we get each other our gifts?"

"Nope, that was me," said Chris with a smile.

"Have I mentioned that you're the best cousin ever?" El said as she wrapped her arms around Chris.

"No, but I'm honored to hold the title," said Chris. When he and El broke apart their hug, he turned to his gift. "Now, this is a first. I don't think I've ever been the last person to open a gift during our Secret Santa."

"Shut up and open it!" Max said.

Chris chuckled at her and opened it. Inside was a white box that Chris assumed meant his gift was some sort of clothing. He opened the box and pulled out a dark green sweater.

"Wow," Chris said breathlessly. "This is a great sweater."

"I thought it would match your eyes," Richie said, blushing. "I hope you like it."

"I love it, Richie, thank you," Chris said, standing up and pulling Richie into a hug. "This is wonderful. I'll wear it on Christmas Day, I promise."

"Really?" said Richie, smiling properly now but still red in the face.

"Of course! Aside from matching my eyes, it's the perfect color for Christmas!"

For the next hour or so, the Party enjoyed each other's company, laughing and badly singing Christmas carols and eating cookies and other treats and clearing out the supply of hot chocolate Will and

Chris had prepared. It was time for the party to end much sooner than any of them would have liked.

"I hate to be the party pooper, but I gotta get up early in the morning for our flight to California," Max said, standing up. She walked over to Chris and hugged him. "Thanks for a great party, as always."

"Have fun in sunny California! Get a tan for me too," said Chris with a laugh. Max lightly punched him on the arm before she started hugging everyone else.

Soon, everyone but El, Chris, Will, Mike and Richie had left. El went to the kitchen to grab leftovers while the boys bade each other good night.

"Thanks for a great time," Mike said as he hugged Chris and Will.

"Thank you for coming," Chris said happily. "I hope you have a great Christmas."

"Thank you again for that sketchbook," said Will. "I'll make sure to put it to good use."

At that, Richie's phone buzzed and he pulled it out of his pocket.

"Mom's here to pick us up," he said, sounding sad.

"We'll walk you out," said Chris.

Chris and Will walked with Mike and Richie to the front door. Mike and Will walked out of the house first, but Chris pulled Richie back.

"What's up?" Richie asked, looking confused.

"I just wanted to say thanks again for the sweater," Chris said happily. "That was very thoughtful of you."

Richie blushed again.

"Oh, it was nothing. I'm just glad you like it."

"I hope you have a great Christmas, Richie."

"You too, Chris," Richie said, not rolling the Rs in Chris' name for the first time in a while. Suddenly, Richie looked up behind Chris and his eyes widened. "Shit."

"What?" Chris said, sounding worried.

"Mistletoe."

Chris turned around and glanced up. He had forgotten that his parents liked to move the mistletoe around and that one of the places it hung was under the stairs in the entrance. Chris' face reddened slightly as he realized they were both standing under it.

"Sorry, I'll just go," Richie said, sounding mortified.

"No, Richie, it's okay," Chris said, trying his best to sound reassuring. "Really, I wouldn't mind if you kissed me. After all, that is the rule of being under mistletoe."

"Are you sure?"

"Positive," said Chris with a nod. "It's just a kiss. Besides, you're a good friend. If I'm okay with kissing anyone, it's you."

"Okay," Richie said, blushing profusely again. Chris smiled at him as Richie leaned in, closed his eyes and pressed their lips together. The kiss only lasted a few seconds, but it left Chris feeling warm. When they broke the kiss, Chris pulled Richie in for a hug.

"Richie?"

"Yeah?"

"Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Chris."

Richie broke apart the hug and smiled at Chris before he turned and walked out of the front door. Chris watched him and heard Will say goodnight to him before Will walked back into the house and closed the door.

"What is it?" Will asked, noticing the odd expression on Chris' face.

"I, uh...Richie and I just kissed."

If there was an answer Will was expecting, that certainly wasn't it.

"You did what now?" Will asked, a smile growing on his face.

"It didn't mean anything," Chris said hurriedly. "We just both realized we were under the mistletoe and it just kinda happened."

"Uh huh, sure," Will said with a sly smile. "Don't pretend that you didn't like that."

"It's not like that, Will. It wouldn't have even happened if Richie didn't notice the mistletoe. But then he felt awkward, so I told him it was okay if he kissed me."

"And did you like it?"

"I don't know," Chris said. "I mean, I felt warm when we kissed, but that's it. But I feel like I was leading him on or something and I didn't mean to do that..."

"Hey, relax," Will said, putting a hand on Chris' shoulder. "I'm sure Richie didn't think you were leading him on. He knows you think of him as just a friend."

"But what if he wants something more?" Chris asked, sounding worried. "I don't want him thinking like I want a relationship with him or anything, but I still want to be friends with him and..."

"Would you just listen to Will and calm down?" El said, annoyed. Both Chris and Will jumped.

"I didn't even know you were there!" Chris exclaimed.

"That is obvious," El said impatiently. "Now, listen Chris, yes it's a little weird that you two kissed, but that doesn't mean it has to be weird, right? It was just a kiss. You and Richie are good friends, is all. Just don't think too much about it."

"Easy for you to say," Chris said bitterly.

Chris hesitated when he noticed the envelope sitting on his desk. It had his name printed on it in handwriting he didn't recognize, but he knew it wasn't on his desk when he went downstairs to get ready for the Christmas party. Slowly, Chris picked up the envelope and sat down on his bed, trying to calm his breathing before he ripped open the envelope. Inside was a typed letter.

Dear Chris,

Sorry for breaking into your room to leave you this note, but I thought it would be weird if I just handed it to you or said any of this to you in person. Then again, sneaking into your room is weird enough.

But enough about that. I just wanted you to know I understand how you feel about relationships. I understand that you don't trust them and you think they can be a waste of time. I totally get that. And to some extent, I agree with you. People shouldn't be in relationships unless their hearts are truly in it.

That being said, your feelings about relationships hasn't stopped me from falling in love with you. God, it feels weird typing those words out. It was hard enough admitting that to myself.

I know this is something you probably don't want to hear, and that's okay. And I know that you'll probably reject me, and I can live with that. What I can't live with is not telling you how I feel and seeing if there's a chance for us to be together.

I'll be at your New Year's party with everyone else. I'd like to tell you who I am there, if that's all right with you. If it is, meet me on the balcony on the second floor at 11:00 on New Year's Eve.

Please don't hate me, Chris. I just can't help how I feel.

I love you.

A Secret Admirer

If Chris wasn't hyperventilating before he read the letter, he certainly

was now.

How can this be?

Someone's in love with me?

Why?

How?

Shit, I need to call somebody.

Chris fumbled around for his phone, which he had placed on his nightstand before changing into his pajamas. He reached over and grabbed it and dialed the first number he could think of.

"Please answer," he whispered.

It was a few moments before he heard a voice.

"Gee, we've only been gone for half an hour and already you're missing us?" Will asked in an amused tone.

"Will!" Chris exclaimed, letting out the breath he hadn't realized he had been holding.

"Chris, are you okay? What's wrong?"

Chris started breathing faster and sweating.

"Chris, take a deep breath," Will instructed, sounding dead worried. "Come on, breathe in through your nose and out through your mouth. Deep breaths, Chris."

Chris did as Will told him. Within moments, his breathing had returned to normal and his heart was no longer racing.

"Now, what's going on?" Will demanded.

"I have a secret admirer," Chris blurted out, now realizing how ridiculous it sounded, especially to have such a reaction.

There was a beat before Will responded.

"What happened?"

"I don't know, exactly, but they left a note for me on my desk," Chris said. "It's someone in the Party, Will. I'm sure of it. That envelope wasn't on my desk when I came downstairs."

"What does the letter say?"

"It says that they're in love with me. Oh my god, Will, how can this be? How can somebody be in love with me?"

"Chris, come on, it's not hard to love you," Will said, sounding exasperated. "You are a good person and a good friend. And you're the best damn cousin on the planet. You're always there for all of us when we need it. It's not that surprising that somebody fell in love with you."

"But why fall in love with me? Even the person who wrote the letter says they know how I feel about relationships!"

"Look, I think more than anything you're scared of getting hurt."

Chris scoffed.

"I'm serious, Chris. I think you're just scared of getting your heart broken. You've seen a bunch of people hurt by someone you love and it scares you. You've even see me get hurt. And I know you don't want to experience that, Chris, but the only way to avoid that is to shut yourself off, and for you to stop loving. And that's no way to live, Chris."

There were several seconds of silence as Chris digested all of this. He could hear the wisdom of Will's words, but it still didn't help his anxiety.

"What do I do, Will?" he asked in a small voice.

"Well, what else did your secret admirer say?"

"They said to meet them at 11:00 on New Year's Eve on the balcony," Chris said. "They said regardless of how I feel, they just need to hear it from me."

"Then you'll meet with them and make a decision," Will said decisively.

"But..."

"That's what you'll do, Chris. You owe them at least that much. I know you're scared, but I'm gonna have your back, Chris, you know that right?"

"Yeah, I know."

"And I'll be with you the whole way, I promise. Sometimes you've just got to put yourself out there and let yourself be vulnerable. I know it's scary, Chris, but I will be there for you. And so will El. And the rest of the party. And it sounds like from what your admirer wrote, they just want you to be happy and to let you know how they feel."

"Thank you, Will," Chris said quietly.

"You're my first and best friend, Chris. I will always be there for you. We always have each other's backs."

"Yeah."

"So who do you think it is?"

"Honestly? I have no idea. The letter was typed and I didn't recognize the handwriting on the envelope, but it could've been faked so I wouldn't recognize it."

"Well, I think it's Richie," Will said slyly. "Anybody who gets someone a gift because it matches their eyes is full of love. And besides, it sounds like both of you didn't mind kissing each other."

"Oh shut up," Chris said, letting out a laugh for the first time since he called Will.

"That's what I wanted to hear: you laughing," Will said, satisfied. "Now look, I know this is a lot, but you should put it out of your mind until after Christmas, okay? You need to enjoy the holiday before you worry about New Year's."

"I will. Thanks for being so supportive, Will."

"I'll see you Christmas morning," Will said. "I love you, Chris."

"I love you, too, Will."

5. New Year's Eve

Chris paced nervously around his bedroom. Will was sitting on Chris' bed, looking somewhat annoyed, but also worried about how Chris was behaving.

"God, what am I gonna do, Will?" Chris asked when he had finally stopped pacing. "I can't stop thinking about it!"

"Listen to me, you've just got to relax, Chris," Will said, trying not to sound impatient. "Now tell me, what scares you the most about all of this?"

Chris thought about it for a moment before he answered.

"I just don't know if I can trust them," he said in a small voice.

"Okay, then that's the main root of your concern. But I can tell you that you don't have to worry about trusting your admirer."

"What do you mean?"

"Look, you know that it's somebody in the party, right?"

"Right; it can't be anyone else because that letter wasn't in my room before you guys arrived for the party."

"And you trust everyone in The Party, right?"

Chris nodded.

"Of course! I would trust you all with my life!"

"Then that's it; your admirer is someone you know and it's someone in The Party, so you know you can trust them. Whoever it is will be considerate of you, Chris. I mean, they already have, really. Reading that letter, it's clear they understand your feelings about relationships, but they're willing to take that risk in spite of that fear. Hell, Chris, if that isn't true love, then I don't know what is."

Chris nodded at Will as he digested all of this. He resumed pacing for

several moments while Will watched him patiently. Finally, Chris sat down on his bed next to Will.

"You're right," Chris said. "You're always right, Will. Maybe I should learn to remember that."

Will chuckled.

"Yeah, you should, Chris."

"Thank you for being here for me. I don't know what I'd do without you."

Chris leaned closer to Will and pulled him into a hug, which Will returned warmly.

"Of course, Chris. All I want is for you to be happy. And I know that's what your admirer wants, too. But I do think you should do something, Chris, even though it may terrify you."

"I can tell I'm gonna love this," Chris said, sitting up from hugging Will.

"Oh shut it and just listen to me. You did say I'm always right." Will said with a laugh. "But, I think you should at least tell The Party. Honesty has always been one of your best traits, Chris, and I think The Party deserves to hear this from you before you and your secret admirer meet."

"I think you're right," Chris said, nodding. "Besides, I think it'll be less awkward if I tell everyone before I meet with them. I'll let everyone know when they get here."

"Good. Now what about your parents?"

"Oh good god, I've been avoiding telling them about it all week. I know they think something is up, but I can't tell them about it, at least not yet. I want to talk to the admirer first before I go running to Mom and Dad and telling them."

Will nodded.

"I get that. But you know you don't have to worry about what they think, right?"

"Yeah, I know, I just don't want them asking a bunch of questions before I even know what's going on with all of this. But I promise I will tell them."

By 8:00, the rest of The Party had arrived at Chris' house for the New Year's Eve party. Chris gathered everyone in his living room before they went outside to join the adults, who were mingling out in the backyard and having drinks.

Chris stood up, looking around at everyone.

"Hey guys," he said in a shaky voice. "There's something important I wanted to tell you guys before we went outside."

Chris paused for a moment, taking several deep breaths.

"Are you okay, Chris?" asked Richie, glancing up at Chris with concern.

"Yeah, yeah," Chris said. He looked over at Will, who smiled and nodded encouragingly at him.

"Well, I don't really know where to begin, but I guess I'll start at the beginning," Chris said as he took a deep sigh. "After you all left here from the Christmas party, I found an envelope on my desk."

Chris paused here to glance around at everyone to see if anyone's facial expression would change. He was slightly disappointed when everyone simply stared at him as if inviting him to continue.

"I opened the envelope and I read the letter inside, which told me that someone has fallen in love with me. When I read it, I kinda freaked out because you all know how I feel about love and relationships. But, thanks to the best cousin on the planet," Chris said, smiling at Will, who nodded back at him, beaming, "I calmed down a little when we talked about it.

"Now, I get that this probably comes as a bit of a shock to you all, but

my admirer is also somebody in The Party. And no, I'm not gonna guess who it is," Chris added, seeing Max and El were about to open their mouths. "I'm supposed to meet my admirer at 11:00 on the balcony outside my parent's room."

"Are you gonna do it, Chris?" Dustin asked, sounding more excited than Chris felt about the whole situation.

"I'm going to at least meet with my admirer, yes," said Chris. "I want to know who it is and I want us to have a chance to talk."

"Good for you!" Mike said happily as he stood up and clapped Chris on the back.

"Hear hear!" called Richie.

"El, you owe me five bucks," Max said with a triumphant grin as El rolled her eyes.

"What, you have a bet going or something?" Chris asked.

"I bet El that you would get in a relationship before the end of sophomore year; she thought you'd actually make it all through high school before you even thought about it."

"Well, I'm not in a relationship yet, Max," Chris said exasperated. "I'm only gonna hear out my admirer and let them talk to me about how they feel. But who knows, before the night is out, I just might be in a relationship."

"At which time I'll be taking that five bucks, El," Max said.

"Oh, shut up!" El said irritably.

"Hey, don't talk to Mad Max like that!" Lucas exclaimed. "You know she'll kill a man without hesitation."

"Yeah and that man will probably be you, Sinclair, so watch it," Max said.

"And on that note, you all go have fun outside," Chris said with a grin. "I'll see you all out there, and I'll see one of you in about three

hours on the balcony."

The Party dispensed. Everyone except Will and Chris went outside to join the festivities. Chris sat down next to Will, who was beaming at him.

"Well, it looks like I'm really gonna do this," Chris said, letting out a breath. "That was easier than I thought it was gonna be, telling everyone."

"I'm really proud of you, Chris," Will said, smiling at him. "That took a lot of guts to be honest with us, but I'm glad that you can trust all of us."

"And that's how I know I'll be okay."

With five minutes to go until 11:00, Chris headed up the stairs to the second floor with Will following him closely behind. When they reached his parent's bedroom, Chris opened the door to the balcony and let the cool air outside calm him down. He took several deep breaths before turning to Will.

"Thank you again for everything, Will."

Will smiled at Chris and pulled him into a hug. Will tried to put as much reassurance into it as he could and held Chris tightly as he whispered into his ear.

"You're gonna be fine, I know it," Will said. "I'll be waiting for you downstairs with everyone else. Just remember what I said: be honest. Your admirer deserves that much."

Chris broke apart the hug and smiled at Will.

"I will. I love you, Will."

"I love you too," Will said as he turned to walk away. "Good luck, Chris."

Chris nodded and turned around to face the night sky. Luckily for him, the balcony sat on the side of the house instead of right over the

backyard, so he could only hear muffled sounds coming from the party happening down below. Chris was glad for this and wondered vaguely if his admirer had planned their meeting like this in order to be heard against the noise of the party.

Chris glanced at his watch. Two minutes to go. Under other circumstances, Chris might have started to panic, but he just kept repeating Will's words from earlier.

You know you can trust them. You know you can trust them. You know you can trust them.

One minute till 11:00. Chris closed his eyes and let the cool breeze wash over his face. It made him feel calmer than he had all evening. He took several deep breaths as he counted down the seconds to the new hour.

Chris' heart skipped a beat when he heard his watch beep to announce a new hour. He kept his eyes closed until he heard a familiar voice from behind him speak.

"Hey, Chris."

Richie sat down on his bed while Mike looked up from his homework that he was working on at their desk. Mike took one look at Richie and immediately felt concerned. He could tell Richie's mind was racing and that his twin was nervous about something. It was almost as if Mike could feel what Richie was and it wasn't good.

"Are you okay?" Mike demanded, standing up and walking over to Richie's bed.

Richie nodded hesitantly and didn't flinch when Mike sat down on his bed.

"What's going on, Rich? I know when something is bugging you and it looks like you've got a lot on your mind at the moment."

Richie sighed, staring off in the distance before he answered.

"When did you know you were in love with Charlie?" he asked.

If there was a response Mike was not expecting to hear, it was certainly not that.

"I, uh...I'm not sure exactly. It was more like it happened over time. My feelings just kinda grew as we bonded over things. And soon I couldn't deny it any longer, I just knew I was in love with him."

Richie nodded, as if Mike's words were confirming his worst fears.

"I'm pretty sure I'm in love with someone," Richie whispered as he looked away in shame.

"That's great, Richie!" Mike exclaimed, but Richie shook his head and Mike frowned. "What is it?"

"I'm pretty sure the person I love won't ever love me back."

Oh.

"Why do you say that, Richie?"

"There's just no way that they feel the same way I do, Mike. It's impossible!"

"Nothing is impossible, Richie. Trust me, if there's anything I've learned since Charlie died, it's that." At this, Mike hesitated slightly.

"Is there something else?" Richie asked, having sensed Mike's change in demeanor.

"This may not be the best time for me to say this, but I'm in love with somebody, too," Mike said quietly. Richie looked up at him, his eyes wide.

"Really? You're not fucking with me?"

Mike sighed.

"Leave it to you to say something like that when we're having a serious conversation," he said, rolling his eyes.

"Sorry, Mike and Ike, I can't help it," Richie said with a grin.

"Sure you can't. But yes, Richie, I'm in love with somebody too. But if I'm being honest, it scares the living shit out of me."

Richie nodded as he grabbed a hold of Mike's wrists.

"I know you're scared. I am, too, Mike. What should I do?"

Mike considered his twin for a moment, feeling warmth through his body as Richie held onto his wrists. Finally, Mike smiled at him.

"Tell you what, if you tell the person you love how you feel, I'll do the same. And that way we can get through it together, Rich. We always have each other's backs, so why not have them through this?"

Richie smiled at Mike.

"I think that's a great idea."

"So what'd you do?" Mike asked playfully as he put away his and Richie's coats in their closet.

"I wrote them a note and hid it in a place where I know they'll find it without anyone seeing it beforehand."

"Nicely done."

"Yeah, I'm scared shitless of it, but I'm glad I did it. And with any luck, I'm gonna tell them in person on New Year's."

"How'd you work that out?" Mike asked as he sat down on Richie's bed.

"I told them to meet me on the balcony at Chris' house at the New Year's Party. I wanna talk to them at 11:00 while the party is going on, this way we have some private time together."

"I think that's a great idea," Mike said with a smile. "You've been incredibly brave, Richie, taking a chance like that. I'm proud of you. So proud of you that I'm willing to tell you who I love."

Richie perked up.

"For real, Mike and Ike?"

"For real, but I may not tell you if you call me that name again."

"Sorry, Mike it's a habit."

"A bad one, but it's one I don't think I'll ever get tired of," Mike said with a smile as he pulled Richie into a hug. They whispered the names of the ones they had both fallen in love with. When they broke apart, both of them were smiling.

"I can't say I'm surprised," Richie said with a grin. "I kinda had a feeling from the start."

"So did I," said Mike, nodding. "And I kinda already knew who you are crushing on. If anything, I'm kinda surprised I didn't fall for them."

Richie chuckled as he pulled Mike into another hug.

"Thank you, Mike."

Chris turned around to face his admirer.

"Hello, Richie," he said with a smile.

Richie's face lit up as he walked onto the balcony and stood next to Chris. He looked nervous and seemed to be breathing heavier than normal.

"Are you surprised that it's me?"

"Yes and no. Honestly, I didn't know who it was, but Will had his heart set on it being you. So I'm not too surprised. But I want to apologize to you before you say anything."

Richie's face fell.

"It's not because it's you, I swear," Chris said hurriedly. "No, it's just that I want to apologize for kissing you at the Christmas party. I didn't mean to lead you on or anything, Richie. It's not like I had read

the letter yet or anything, I was just trying to clear up an awkward moment, but I think I made it worse by asking you to kiss me..."

"Don't worry about it, Chris," Richie said in a quiet voice. "I haven't been able to stop thinking about it and I don't regret it happening at all. Even though I hadn't told you how I felt yet. But some part of me knew that you hadn't read the letter yet."

"How did you work that out?"

"Well, I knew you hadn't been to your room since I snuck in there and left it on your desk," Richie explained sheepishly. "God, I know that sounds creepy but that was the only way I could think of that didn't involve me sneaking around the rest of your house. At least I've been in your room before."

Chris grinned at him, but something was nagging at him.

"When did you do it? I mean, I know you did it at the Christmas party because the letter was definitely not on my desk when I came downstairs to let Will and El in."

"I may or may not have faked a bathroom break while you and Will were making the hot chocolate for us and hid it when everyone thought I was in the bathroom."

"Clever," Chris said, amused.

"Yeah," Richie said, his voice dropping off slightly. Both of the boys looked away from each other, an awkward silence filling the air around them. They both glanced out at the empty night sky. Finally, Richie spoke again.

"Please don't hate me, Chris."

Chris turned to Richie and rested one of his hands on Richie's. Richie certainly didn't seem to mind and actually smiled a bit at this affection.

"I could never hate you, Richie," Chris said in a determined tone. "You're one of my dearest friends. I know we haven't known each other that long, but you still mean a lot to me, Richie. Especially now

after you've been honest with me about how you feel about me. I know it was scary to admit this to me, but I'm glad that you did."

"Really?" Richie asked as if he couldn't believe what he was hearing.

Chris nodded.

"Yes. I appreciate your honesty and your willingness to put your heart out there for me. That's a true sign of how you feel about me, Richie. You're one of my best friends, Richie, which is why you don't have to worry about making me feel bad, or about me reacting badly to how you feel. You can't help who you love, Richie. In my heart, I know that."

Richie smiled slightly as a tear fell down his face. He wiped it away impatiently before he spoke again.

"Thank you for saying all of that," he said. "I certainly feel a huge weight off my shoulders now that I've told you how I feel. But I have to know, Chris, how do you feel?"

Chris took a deep breath before responding, his hand still resting on Richie's.

"I've thought long and hard about this, Richie," he started before Richie interrupted him.

"That's what she said," Richie said with a grin.

"Don't push your luck, Richie," Chris said with a glare before he giggled. "I'm just kidding. But in all seriousness, I have spent a lot of time thinking about this, especially tonight. And with Will's guidance, I know how I feel."

There was a beat.

"And?" Richie prompted, sounding nervous.

Chris sighed.

"I don't know if I trust love," Chris said. "If I'm being honest, that's how I feel." Richie's face dropped again, but Chris leaned closer and

lifted Richie's chin with the hand that had been holding Richie's. "But I do know this, Richie: I trust you. Just like everyone else in The Party, I would trust you with my life. And that's what I am willing to give this a chance."

Richie's eyes widened in shock while Chris simply smiled at him.

"Is this real life?" Richie asked in a dumbfounded voice.

"Yes, Richie, it's real. Now, kiss me."

Richie beamed as he leaned in, wrapping his arms around Chris' waist. Chris leaned closer, cupping Richie's face and their lips met. This kiss was deeper than the one at the Christmas party. As cliché as it sounded to Chris, it felt like coming home. Richie made him feel safe, wanted and loved. And that was all that mattered. Chris smiled into the kiss as the two of them transmitted their unspoken feelings into each other. After several seconds, they broke the kiss, gasping for air.

They both giggled and Chris pulled Richie in for a hug. They held each other tightly. Richie had tears rolling down his face, but Chris could tell that Richie was happy.

"You've made me so happy, Chris. I can't thank you enough for this."

Chris smiled.

"We're going to be great together," he declared. "I know that in my heart. And no matter what, I'll always love you, Richie."

"I love you too."

They broke apart the hug and stared at each warmly. After several seconds, Chris grabbed onto one of Richie's hands.

"Well, shall we tell the others?" he said with a grin.

"Yeah, probably. I don't think anyone saw me coming upstairs so they're probably all wondering where I am if they haven't figure it out yet."

Chris smiled and nodded, pulling Richie away from the night air and shutting the balcony door behind them. They walked downstairs hand-in-hand and quickly found themselves back in the living room, where the rest of The Party was waiting. As soon as El saw Chris and Richie walk into the room holding hands, she let out a squawk, which caught everyone's attention. The entire Party started to clap madly as Chris and Richie grinned at them all, blushing heavily.

"Well done, boys!" Max cried as she hugged both of them.

"We're really happy for you guys!" said Dustin.

"Yeah, but don't think this makes you a cuter couple than me and Max."

"Shut up, Lucas!" Max demanded.

Chris and Richie grinned at them before they turned to their family members. Will, El and Mike all had identical smiles on their faces. El hugged Chris first.

"I'm so happy for you," she whispered, tears streaming down her face. Chris gave her a kiss on the cheek.

"Thank you, dear cousin," he whispered back.

Chris turned to Mike and pulled him into a hug.

"I'll take care of him, I promise."

"I know you will," said Mike.

They broke apart just as Richie and El did. Richie and Mike hugged each other tightly as Chris turned to Will, who had one of the happiest looks on his face that Chris had ever seen. Chris pulled Will into a rib-cracking hug that Will returned enthusiastically.

"Thank you so much for convincing me to be honest," Chris said. "I can never thank you enough for this."

"I'm so proud of you, Chris."

6. Bombshell

Chris followed Pearl into the kitchen, where Dale had already started preparing dinner.

"Hey, how was the doctor?" Dale asked when he noticed his wife and son were in the room. He gave Pearl a kiss and a questioning look when he saw the blank expression on her face. Pearl shook her head.

"Same old, same old," Chris said. "Although they did take me for a blood test after the initial checkup."

"A blood test? Why, what's going on?"

"Oh, you know, Dad, they probably just wanted to charge our insurance a little extra. You know, keep the dollars running in."

Dale chuckled appreciatively.

"Yeah, that's probably what it was," he said, still looking at Pearl with concern, but not letting Chris see it.

"Anyway, I'd better get into my room and get a headstart on my essay for history class. I'll see you guys in a bit."

Chris gave his mother a kiss on the cheek before he left the kitchen. Dale turned to Pearl.

"What's going on?" he demanded.

"We need to talk, Dale. Dr. Nichols ordered the blood test because he felt some swelling on Chris' neck."

"Some swelling? Did he say what it was?"

"That's why he ordered the blood test and had Chris see a specialist. The specialist told me she thought she felt a lump on his thyroid."

"What kind of lump?" Dale asked, staring at Pearl in shock.

"She's not sure; they're just going to have to wait until the test results

come back. They've scheduled an appointment for the day after tomorrow."

"Did they say what it might be?"

"Yeah, it could be hypothyroidism, which would just mean he'd have to take a pill every day for the rest of his life," Pearl explained, pulling a brochure out of her purse and handing it to Dale. "It could also be something called a goiter, which they said is basically nothing we have to worry about."

"But?"

"But it could also be malignant," Pearl said in a soft voice.

Dale's eyes widened in shock as he digested this. He felt his throat tighten up; he wasn't able to speak.

"I can't believe this," Pearl said. "I mean we just go there for a routine checkup and the next thing I know, I'm talking to a specialist about lumps. I kept telling Chris in the car that everything is okay and meanwhile I'm living my worst nightmare and..."

Pearl broke down at this. Dale wrapped his arms around her as Pearl burst into tears.

"I know, Honey, it's my worst nightmare, too."

"Oh god, what are we gonna do, Dale?"

"There's not much we can do. We just have to wait until the test results come back."

"Do we tell Chris?"

"And worry him even more than we're already worried?" Dale asked as he broke the hug but kept his wife held in his arms. "I don't think that's a good idea."

"But we'll have to tell him something, Dale. He can't just be left in the dark."

Dale considered this for a moment.

"Well, maybe we can tell him some of the truth about it. We can mention the hypothyroidism and the goiter thing, but just say there's a chance it might have to be removed and leave it at that. There's no need to worry him about cancer until we know something for sure."

"I don't know, Dale. What if it turns out to be cancer?"

"Well, we'll cross that bridge when we get to it, I guess."

"Mmmm, smells good in here," Dale said as he walked into the kitchen the next morning and saw Pearl manhandling several pots and pans on the stove. "What are you making?"

"My famous biscuits and gravy," Pearl replied proudly.

"Honey, you're gonna tip him off."

"What do you mean?" Pearl asked, frowning.

"If he sees you cooking this special breakfast, he's gonna know something is up. You only make it on special occasions."

"Damn it, I didn't think about that."

But it was too late. At that moment, Chris walked into the kitchen, inhaling deeply.

"Oh my god, is that your famous biscuits and gravy I smell, Mom?" he asked with a smile.

"Uh, yeah, Honey," Pearl said, sounding distracted.

"What's the occasion?"

"No reason," Dale said quickly before Pearl could answer. "Mom just felt like making a big, hearty breakfast for a change."

"That's nice," Chris said. "I'm not used to having such a big breakfast, Ma. Heck, if I didn't know any better, I'd think I was dying."

Dale looked up in shock while Pearl dropped the spatula she was using to stir the gravy. Chris stared at his parents' reactions, surprised.

"That was a joke, guys," he said, trying to smile.

"A joke...right, a joke," Dale said, quickly mustering up some laughs. "I didn't get it right away, but I got it now. Chris, you should make sure your Mom got it too."

Chris looked at Pearl and noticed the worried expression on her face.

"Does this have something to do with that blood test I got yesterday?" he asked.

Dale and Pearl exchanged a look and silently came to an agreement. Pearl walked over to Chris.

"When Dr. Nichols was doing your check up, he felt some swelling on your neck. And so he sent you to that specialist so she could have a look, too, and she felt a lump."

"A lump?" Chris asked, a confused expression on his face. "What does that mean?"

"Now, it could be hypothyroidism, which would just mean you'd have to take a pill every day for the rest of your life," Pearl explained.

"A very small one," Dale said, attempting to add something to the conversation.

"Or it could also be something called a goiter."

"Which is nothing."

"So why do they call it a goiter instead of calling it nothing?"

"Well, it's not exactly the same thing," Dale said hurriedly. "You wouldn't say Hawkins, 12, Indianapolis, Goiter for a football game score."

Chris frowned at his father's odd joke, but turned back to his mother,

who he could see was hesitating to say what she wanted to say next.

"There's also a small chance, a very small chance that the lump would be something that would eventually have to be removed."

"You mean like I'd have an operation?"

"A very small one."

"Would I have a scar?"

"A very small one."

"Dad, you can stop with that," Chris said, rolling his eyes slightly. He turned to his mother. "So, when do we find out what this is?"

"Your doctor has another appointment scheduled for tomorrow morning," Pearl said. "Your father and I will both be there with you if you want us to be."

"I mean if it's not that big of a deal, I don't get why you're worried."

Dale and Pearl looked at each other again, as if slightly asking each other if they were doing the right thing by keeping Chris in the dark. Finally, Pearl spoke again.

"We just want to make sure you're one hundred percent healthy, Chris."

"I want that too," Chris said in a small voice. "But I feel totally okay, if that's what you're worried about." He glanced at his watch. "Listen, I'd better get going or I'm gonna be late picking up Will and El."

"Oh! Are you sure you don't wanna stay home?" Pearl asked, sounding desperate. "We could talk about this."

"There's nothing to talk about. I'm fine. Listen, I'll see you guys after school, okay?"

"Okay, Honey," Pearl said as Chris gave her a kiss on the cheek before giving his father a quick hug and leaving the kitchen.

"You're right, I tipped him off," Pearl said, the guilt flowing through her whole body. "What was I thinking, making him a big breakfast like that for no reason?"

"Come on, Honey. We knew we were gonna have to face this sooner or later," Dale said, giving Pearl a kiss on the forehead.

"I know, I just hate lying to him."

Chris was nearly finished with his lunch by the time Will sat down to join him. Somehow the two of them had gotten separated while walking to the lunchroom and Chris ended up first in line for lunch while Will winded up near the back of the crowd.

"Nice of you to join me," Chris said with a grin.

"Not my fault I'm so damn short and lost you in the crowd!" Will retorted.

Chris chuckled.

"Only joking. Actually, it's probably a good thing that I ate so quickly. I was gonna go the library."

"Studying instead of hanging out with your cousin, boyfriend and best friends? It must be important."

"Oh, shut it, I just have some fine tuning to do on my essay before I hand it in later. I didn't have time to go over it last night, so I'd better go finish it."

Chris made to up just as Richie joined them at the table.

"Where you going?" Richie asked, frowning.

"Chris is a huge nerd," Will said as an answer.

"Fuck off," Chris said while Will laughed. He turned to Richie. "I'm gonna go work on my essay. I gotta get it done before I hand it in."

"Darn, I was hoping we could have lunch together," Richie pouted.

"I know," Chris said, giving Richie a kiss on the cheek. "But if you want me to be in the same grade as you next year, you'd better let me go and finish this."

"Oh, all right."

Chris grinned and turned to Will.

"Hey, before you go, I won't be walking home with you after school," Will said. "Mike and I are gonna study at my place for a bit."

"Study, huh?" Chris said, waving an eyebrow suggestively.

"You beat me to it!" Richie exclaimed.

"It's not like that!" Will said, blushing. "We're just gonna study and maybe hang out for a few hours."

"You know, Will, you could tell Mike how you feel. It's obvious to anyone with eyes how you both feel about each other."

Chris caught Richie's eyes and they nodded at each other. Will sighed before he answered.

"I'll think about it."

Will and Mike had been working on their homework for about an hour when Will stood up to stretch. He groaned slightly as his body adjusted.

"Oh, all this algebra is starting to get to me," he said. "You up for watching a movie or something for a bit?"

"Yeah sure," Mike said, not looking up from his notes. "Let me just finish this assignment for English. I just need about five minutes."

Will nodded and packed away his school things before he walked over to the movie shelf. He glanced around, searching for the perfect movie.

"Any preferences?" Will asked.

"I'm good with anything," Mike said, still not looking up from his notes.

Will grinned slightly to himself as he pulled a movie called *To Wong Foo, Thanks for Everything! Julie Newmar* from his shelf and walked over to the sofa and sat down, waiting patiently for Mike to finish. Finally, Mike closed his book and looked up at Will, who blushed slightly.

"I think we should do a comedy," said Will. "I could do with a laugh."

Mike nodded at him. Will stood up and walked over to the TV to put the movie into the Blu Ray player while Mike sat down on the sofa, just inches from where Will had been sitting. Once the TV was ready and the movie had loaded, Will walked back over and sat down next to Mike, feeling super close to him. Both boys blushed when they realized how close they were; they could feel the heat radiating off of each other. Will turned to Mike and tried to smile, but it came out as a grimace. Mike giggled quietly to himself.

"I think you'll like this," Will said, trying to break the tension. "It's about a group of drag queens who get stuck in a small town while driving across America. It's hella funny."

"I bet I will like it," Mike said.

Suddenly, the Imperial March started playing loudly from Mike's pocket. Mike fumbled and pulled out his phone, seeing a phone call from Richie.

"Nice timing," he said irritably as he pressed the green button to answer the phone and hit the speaker button. "This had better be good, Richie..."

"Mike, are you still at Will's?" Richie demanded in a worried voice.

"Yeah, I'm still over here. What's going on?"

"It's Chris, Mike. He didn't meet me after school to walk home and I came by his house and he's not here."

"What are you talking about?" Will asked, frowning.

"You haven't seen or heard from him, have you?"

"No, the last time I talked to him was at lunch. We usually chat for a bit after the last class, but I didn't see him."

"Shit. Well, I'm at his house and his Mom said he never came home. I'm starting to freak out, guys."

"Stay there," Will ordered. "We'll come over. I'll try calling him."

"Okay, I'll see you soon."

Mike hung up his phone as Will yanked his out of his pocket and dialed Chris' number. It went straight to voicemail.

"Oh my god," Will whispered. "He never ignores my calls and he never turns his phone off. Something is going on."

Mike put a hand on Will's wrist.

"It'll be okay," he said, trying to sound reassuring. "We'll find him, I promise."

Will nodded, but he didn't look convinced.

Will and Mike had just sat down in the kitchen with Pearl and Richie when Dale and Jim came walking into the room. Jim was in his police uniform as always, while Dale was wore a suit without the jacket, his gun and police badge immediately evident on his belt.

"When's the last time everyone saw him?" Jim said as a greeting. Everyone hurriedly answered him and Jim nodded before Dale spoke up.

"I think I know where he is," Dale said.

"You do?" asked Pearl.

"Yeah, I have an idea. Listen, why don't you all stay here, and I'll drive around, see what I can find. I'm pretty sure I know where he is. Don't worry, please?"

"You know I'm going to anyway," Pearl said, but she was nodding. "Go and find him. I'll call you if I get anything."

Chris was focused on playing Ms. Pac Man that he didn't notice his father approaching him from behind. Instead, he only looked away from the game when he heard a tapping on the wall behind him.

"Hey, Chris," Dale said, looking and sounding relieved.

Chris turned around and glared at his father for a moment before he returned to the game.

"What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you. Your Mom and I, and Richie, Will and Mike were worried about you. You know better than to take off without telling us where you're going."

"Then we're even," Chris said shortly as he pressed harder than was needed on the buttons.

"What do you mean?"

"A couple of little things you didn't tell me either, Dad."

"What are you talking about?"

Chris turned around and stared at his father incredulously.

"Like I might have cancer."

Dale's eyes widened as he walked around the wall and came closer to Chris.

"Whoa, whoa, whoa, where did you get that information?"

"While I was on the computer at school," Chris replied as he put a dollar into the token machine. "It said that sometimes these kinds of lumps can be malignant."

Dale put a hand on Chris' shoulder as Chris reached down to take the

tokens.

"Chris, look, the chances of this lump being malignant are next to nothing."

"How could you not tell me about this?" Chris asked, his voice starting to break.

"Because we didn't want you freaking out, okay?"

"Oh, so instead I read about it on a computer in the school library all by myself? And I couldn't even tell Richie or Will or anyone else because they would've freaked out too!"

Dale was at a loss for words.

"Your Mom and I...that's the last thing we wanted you to do. I'm really sorry about that and she will be to, okay?"

"I just don't understand how this could happen!"

"Bad stuff happens to everybody," Dale said, trying to sound reassuring.

Chris turned around as the tears threatened to fall down his face. Dale walked closer to him and rubbed his shoulder.

"I know you're scared. I know how you feel."

"No you don't," Chris said weakly before he turned around, the tears finally swimming in his eyes. "I don't wanna die, Dad."

"Oh, come on, you're not gonna die! Even if you had cancer, which you don't, you do not have that, it's a treatable kind, all right?"

Chris turned around again, holding his breath and waiting to break down. Finally, he faced his father once more and fell into Dale's embrace, sobbing.

"Hey, come on, come on," Dale said as he held onto Chris. "We'll beat this thing, no matter what it is, you know? I'm not letting anything happen to you."

Chris strode over to his mother as soon as he saw her, fresh tears falling down his face. He had never seen Pearl look so relieved in her life.

"I'm sorry, Mom," he said.

"No, no, Honey, shhh," Pearl whispered back as he hugged Chris and gave him a kiss on the forehead. "We should've been honest with you."

"Honest about what?" Will asked in a small voice.

Chris and Pearl broke apart as Chris looked at Will, who looked just as relieved as Pearl did. Chris pulled him into a hug, but didn't answer him. He repeated this gesture with Mike and Richie, and gave Richie a kiss on the cheek.

"Um, can I have a few minutes with these guys?" Chris asked in a shaky voice. "I need to tell them what's going on."

"Of course," Pearl said, nodding as she wiped away a tear.

Chris nodded at her and grabbed hands with Richie and led him, Mike and Will into the living room. He sat down with them on the sectional before he spoke.

"I just wanted to say how sorry I am for worrying all of you. I know how scared all of you were and I didn't mean for that to happen. I just needed to be alone for a little while."

"Chris, what is going on?" Richie demanded.

Chris took several deep breaths as more tears threatened to fall down his face. He regained his composure and spoke in a steady tone.

"When I was at the doctor yesterday, he felt some swelling on my neck. They took me to get a blood test."

"Oh, Chris," Will whispered, staring at his cousin with wide eyes.

"They're not sure what it is," Chris said hurriedly. "It could be a

number of things. I could need a pill for the rest of my life or it could be nothing."

He hesitated here, looking Richie in the eyes as if afraid of what Richie's reaction would be.

"That's not everything," Mike observed. "There's something else, isn't there?"

Chris nodded, still unable to answer the question.

"Please, just tell us, Chris," Richie begged.

Chris sighed.

"There's a small chance it could be cancerous," he whispered.

"Oh my god!" Richie exclaimed, throwing his arms around Chris protectively. It was too much for Chris to handle; he burst into more tears and sobbed into Richie's shoulder.

"I'm so sorry!" Chris cried. "I couldn't tell you because I was so scared!"

"No, no, you have nothing to be sorry for" Richie said, trying to sound comforting, but his voice was shaking from the tears falling down his face. Instead, Richie gave Chris a kiss on the forehead and rubbed his back.

It was several moments before Chris calmed down. Finally, his sobbing stopped and he pulled himself away from Richie and looked him in the eyes.

"I'm sorry I didn't tell you," Chris said. "Any of you."

"No, don't blame yourself, Chris," Will ordered as he scooted over to Chris and pulled him into a hug. "This was a lot for you to face. You just needed to process it."

"I get it, wanting to shut out the world," Mike added as he scooted closer to Chris and Will. "It's tough when something bad happens to you and you feel like you need to handle it on your own. But the

truth is, we need each other in times like this."

Chris nodded as he broke apart from Will and hugged Mike briefly before Richie wrapped an arm around him and held him close.

"You're gonna be fine, Chris," Richie said, his voice devoid of any humor at all, but Chris could feel the protection Richie was trying to convey with his arm around Chris and the way he spoke. "I'm gonna be here with you, all the way, no matter what."

"We all will," said Mike. "We've got your back, Chris."

"And we love you so much," added Will. "We can't lose you, Chris. We need you. *I* need you."

Chris looked around at the three of them, who were all smiling at him reassuringly. For the first time in a long time, Chris felt totally protected, cared for and loved, rather than doing it himself. After several moments in silence, he nodded.

"Thank you guys. I love you all."

7. Diagnosis

Mike hesitantly followed Will back into the Byers' home. Will hadn't said a word since leaving Chris' house and seemed to be lost in his thoughts. Mike, not wanting to impose, hadn't said anything either, but grew increasingly worried the more he looked at Will, who looked as if he was on the brink of breaking down.

Will walked into the living room and sat down on the sofa, staring off into the distance. Mike sat down next to him and gently scooted closer.

"Are you okay?" Mike asked softly.

The simple question seemed to be too much for Will, who seized up as tears started falling down his face. Mike scooted right next to Will and wrapped his arms around him.

"I'm sorry," Mike said. "I didn't mean to upset you,"

Will simply sobbed into Mike's embrace and clung to him as though it were the only thing keeping him grounded. Mike rubbed Will's back gently, unsure if he was a source of comfort or pain. It took several moments for Will to calm down, but he finally did, his sobbing subsiding and his breathing returning to normal.

"You didn't upset me, I promise," Will whispered.

"Okay, good," Mike said, hesitating. "I just...I can see you have a lot on your mind."

"I'm just so scared, Mike. I'm scared of losing Chris. I can't lose him. I just can't. He's like my brother. It would destroy me if he died."

"I know, I know," Mike said, pulling Will closer to him. Will rested his head on Mike's chest as fresh tears fell down his face. "But listen to me, Will, you're not gonna lose him. Even if he does have cancer, he says it's treatable. He's gonna be okay, I promise."

Will nodded into Mike's embrace.

"I know. But just the thought of it scares me so much, Mike."

"I know, Will. I know what it's like to lose somebody you love. But you're not going to lose Chris, I promise you. And I will be with you every step of the way, no matter what happens."

"Thank you, Mike," Will whispered.

Mike hesitated slightly before he bent down and gave Will a soft kiss on the forehead.

"Everything will be okay," he said, trying to assure himself as much as Will.

Chris and Richie sat together on Chris' bed. Dale and Pearl had hours ago said that Richie could stay the night and accompany Chris to his follow-up appointment in the morning. They had said they knew they couldn't stop Richie if they tried, which Chris and Richie had both laughed at.

"Can I tell you a secret?" Chris asked. "And before you say 'yes,' you have to promise me you won't tell anyone else."

"I promise," Richie said, reaching over and grabbing onto Chris' hand. Their fingers curled around each other and Richie could feel warmth spreading through Chris as if Richie's touch was warming him up.

"There's a reason I freaked out when I found out that I might have cancer, but it's not why you all probably think."

Chris hesitated, looking at Richie with tears swimming in his eyes. Richie nodded encouragingly.

"I'm not scared of dying, Richie. I mean, I am, but it's not the dying that scares me. You know what I'm afraid of?"

Richie shook his head.

"I'm afraid of dying, and it tearing you apart. And Will. And Mom and Dad. And everyone else. I know it's weird, but the only thing I can think about is how if I died, I'd be hurting everyone I loved. I can't let

that happen, Richie."

Chris started to cry. Richie wrapped his arm around Chris and held onto Chris' hand with the other. He pulled Chris closer, trying to be comforting as Chris cried into his shoulder.

"Listen to me, Chris," Richie said softly. "No matter what happens, we're all gonna always have you with us. Even if you die, we will always have you in all of those memories and in our hearts. I can promise you that."

Chris nodded as he pulled himself out of Richie's embrace, keeping hold of Richie's hand.

"I'm sorry for scaring you today," Chris said. Richie opened his mouth to protest, but Chris put his free hand over Richie's mouth to stop him. "Please let me say it." He removed his hand from Richie's mouth. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have ignored you and everyone else like that. I was just scared. Not for me, but for all of you. I couldn't stand the thought of putting you all through pain if this turned out to be something serious. But I'm sorry, Richie. I never meant to scare you or hurt you."

There was a beat before Richie responded.

"You didn't hurt me, but you sure as hell scared me," he said quietly. "It was like the day Charlie died all over again."

"Oh," Chris started, but Richie cut him off.

"Don't feel bad," Richie said quickly. "I'm not saying this to make you feel bad or anything. I just need to be honest with you."

Chris nodded as he wiped fresh tears off of his face.

"When I couldn't get ahold of you and when I came to here, and your Mom told me you weren't here, I started to panic. I thought I had lost you, Chris. And then when Will said he hadn't heard from you, I thought you were gone. It scared me, Chris. Even when your Dad came home and said he thought he knew where you were, I couldn't help but worry about you.

"But when you walked through that door with him, I could breathe again. And my heart was no longer tight in my chest. I was so relieved to see you. And I'm so glad you're here, Chris. I love you so much."

Chris closed the gap between them and locked lips with Richie as the both of them cried. They held each other gently as they kissed. When they broke apart at the lips, Chris was holding both of Richie's hands in his own.

"Thank you for telling me all of that," Chris whispered. "I needed to hear it."

Richie nodded as he pulled Chris into a hug.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" Richie asked.

"Just be here."

Eventually, Chris and Will were both lying on the bed. They slowly inched closer to the headboard as they held onto each other. Finally, they reached the pillows. Richie adjusted his head for comfort and took off his glasses with one hand, keeping the other one wrapped tightly around Chris, who was close to falling asleep. Richie reached over and turned off the lamp on the nightstand before wrapping both of his arms around Chris.

Richie leaned down and gave Chris a kiss on the forehead. Chris hummed quietly and Richie saw a smile grow on his face. Richie pulled Chris closer until Chris had lay his head on Richie's chest. Chris' arms were wrapped tightly around Richie, making Richie feel closer to him than he ever had with anyone else.

"Goodnight, Richie," Chris mumbled as he gave Richie a quick kiss on the cheek before laying back down.

"Goodnight, Chris."

"Chris Byers?" came the voice of a nurse. Chris snapped out of his trance and looked up at the nurse, who was smiling warmly at him. Chris turned to Richie, who nodded at him. The two of them stood up

and followed the nurse along with Dale and Pearl.

The nurse led them into the specialist's office. They sat down in front of the desk.

"The doctor will be with you in just a few moments," the nurse said before she left the room.

"I'd better let Will know we're about to find out," Chris said to nobody in particular. Richie and his parents both seemed lost in their thoughts. Chris couldn't blame them. He'd rather be anywhere but this room right now and he knew they felt the same way. Chris pulled out his phone and typed out a message to Will.

We're about to meet with the doctor. Trying to think positive. I'll call you as soon as we're done. I love you.

Chris sent the message. It was about twenty seconds later that he received Will's reply.

Wish I could be there with you. I'll be waiting for your call. Love you forever, Chris.

Chris smiled at the text just as the door opened and the doctor walked in.

"Hello there, I'm sorry to keep you waiting," she said as she hurried to her desk, carrying a folder. "Chris, it's good to see you again," she said, offering a hand to Chris, who shook it briefly. "And you must be Richie," she said, looking at Richie, who blinked at her. "Chris told me a little about you when we were doing the blood test. And you must be Chris' father," she added, nodding at Dale and shaking his hand. "I'm Dr. Burton. It's good to see you again, Mrs. Byers."

Dr. Burton opened the file and pulled out some papers.

"I have the results of your test, Chris. Now, this may not be the easiest thing to hear, but I want you to listen to me carefully while I explain the results, okay? Can you do that for me?"

"Yes," Chris replied, nodding. His throat felt dry all of a sudden and his stomach was in knots.

"Very well," said Dr. Burton. "Well, Chris, I'm sorry to have to inform you that you do have stage one papillary thyroid cancer."

At this, Chris tensed. Richie sensed it and immediately grabbed onto Chris' hand to keep him grounded. Chris took several deep breaths before he nodded at Dr. Burton.

"I understand," he said in a shaky voice.

"But there is good news," said Dr. Burton. "And that is that this type of cancer is very treatable. A simple operation to remove the cancer is all you should need, Chris."

"What does that mean, exactly?" asked Pearl, who finally seemed to have found her voice.

"Well, we'll have to schedule Chris for an operation to remove the cancer from his thyroid. Since his cancer is stage one and we caught it early, one operation should be all he needs. The operation should just take a couple of hours. You'll need to be in the hospital for a few days, Chris, but with a few days of rest and the love I can see your family has for you, you should be all right."

Dr. Burton gave Chris a warm smile, which Chris tried to return. It came out as a grimace. When he spoke, though, he sounded normal.

"When can we schedule the surgery?" he asked.

"We can check you in next Thursday evening," Dr. Burton explained, pulling a notebook over and started to write on it. "The procedure would take place the next afternoon and we'd keep you here for the weekend. You should be able to go home by Monday, but I'd recommend staying home on bed rest for a few days after that."

Chris nodded at her.

"Can we go ahead and schedule that surgery, doctor?" asked Dale in a soft voice. "I'd like to take care of this as soon as possible."

"Of course, Mr. Byers. I can put Chris down for an appointment at St. Jude's. I'll be the attending physician, so you'll be seeing me there, Chris, if that's all right."

"I think I'd rather have it be you than someone I haven't met yet," said Chris.

Dr. Burton smiled at him.

"I thought so. I'll go ahead and put you down for check-in next Thursday. I'd recommend weaning yourself off of food beginning Thursday afternoon; the surgery is best done on an empty stomach. You'll be on fluids most of the weekend, but we might be able to reintroduce solid food as early as Sunday."

"Is there anything else we should do before the surgery?" Pearl asked.

"I would recommend a diet with lots of vegetables and protein to keep your strength up, Chris. The surgery can be exhausting on the body, so any strength you can build beforehand will help you feel less tired afterward.

"Do you have any more questions?"

The four of them sitting in front of Dr. Burton sat there in silence for about three seconds before Dr. Burton smiled again.

"All right. Well, I'll go ahead and schedule the procedure for next Friday. You'll all be welcome to accompany Chris to the hospital, but you'll have to stay in the waiting room, of course, while he's in surgery."

"Thank you, Doctor," Chris said as he stood up and shook her hand.

"I'll see you next Thursday night, Chris. I'll be with you at the hospital all weekend long."

Chris nodded and walked out of the office holding Richie's hand while his parents thanked Dr. Burton.

"You okay?" Richie asked when they were out of earshot.

"As okay as I'll ever be," Chris replied in a shaky voice. "I'm just glad you were here with me. I'd better call Will, though. I don't want him to worry."

"We'll wait out in the car for you, honey," Pearl said, giving Chris a kiss on the cheek before she motioned for Richie and Dale to follow them out of the waiting room. Chris sat down on an available chair, out of earshot of anyone else, and dialed Will's number. He answered on the second ring.

"Hi," Will said, sounding as if he had been holding his breath while waiting for Chris' call.

"Hi," Chris whispered back.

"You okay?"

"Physically, yes, but emotionally is another story. Are you sitting down?"

"Yeah, I'm out in the hallway."

"Okay." Chris took a deep breath before he continued. "It is cancer, Will."

There was a beat.

"Oh my god," Will breathed into Chris' ear.

"But it's okay, it's the treatable kind. They're gonna get me in for surgery next weekend and they'll be able to treat me." There were several moments of silence. "Did you hear me, Will?"

"Thank god. Oh, thank god. Oh, Chris."

"I know," Chris said as he nodded even though he knew Will couldn't see him. "I'm gonna be fine, Will. I promise."

Chris could hear that Will was about to start crying.

"Oh Chris, I'm so relieved!"

"I know. I am too. Can I ask a favor?"

"Of course, anything."

"Can you tell The Party to meet me at my house tonight after school?"

I need to tell them what's going on and it's better if I do it sooner rather than later."

"Yeah sure. I'll let them know. I'm coming over right after school, though. I just need to see you."

Chris chuckled slightly.

"I need to see you too. I love you, Will."

"I love you, Chris. I'll see you in a few hours."

Chris woke with a start when he heard the front door open. He had fallen asleep on the sectional while Richie was working on homework. He sat up, rubbing his eyes just as Will walked into the living room, taking his backpack off and looking relieved to see Chris.

Chris quickly stood up and hurried to reach Will who practically leapt into Chris' embrace. They fell backward onto the sectional, holding tightly onto each other, and both of them started crying.

"Oh, I'm so glad to see you," Will whispered. "I couldn't stand you not being around today."

"I'm really glad you're here," Chris said.

Over the next hour, the rest of the party arrived and settled in the living room. Joyce and Jim had even arrived with El. The biggest surprise though was Jonathan and Steve arriving. Dale explained their appearance when Chris looked at him questioningly, and said that he had called them because they needed to hear the news from Chris in person.

Finally, everyone had gathered in the living room. The Party was sitting on the sectional, while Jonathan and Steve shared the large recliner next to it. The adults were crowded on the sofa and loveseat that matched the sectional.

Chris turned to Richie, who gave his hand a quick squeeze, before he stood up and looked at everyone. He felt overwhelmed all of a

sudden, knowing he was about to burden them all with this news. He took several deep breaths before he spoke.

"Hi, everyone. I'm sure you're all wondering why we asked you all to come over. And I know you're wondering why I wasn't at school today. Well, I took the day off because of a doctor's appointment I had this morning."

"Wait, didn't you just have a doctor's appointment the other day?" asked Dustin. "That's why you couldn't come to our study session."

Max punched Dustin on the arm and Dustin looked at her incredulously before she turned to face Chris again, who was grinning slightly.

"Yeah, I had one the other day, but this was a follow-up to that appointment. Um...when I was at the doctor, they felt some swelling on my neck. So they sent me to see a specialist and have a blood test done. The specialist felt a lump on my thyroid. So this morning I went with Mom and Dad and Richie to see the specialist."

"What did they say?" El asked in a small voice.

"I have stage one papillary thyroid cancer," Chris said.

The reaction in the room were about what Chris expected them to be. Both El and Max cupped their mouths in shock, while Dustin and Lucas' eyes widened. Jonathan and Steve simply stared at Chris as if they couldn't believe it. Joyce and Jim had grim expressions on their faces. Mike was looking at him, but didn't look surprised. Chris wondered vaguely if Will had told him anything. Will and Richie were looking at him with encouraging expressions.

"But I'm gonna be fine, everyone," Chris said. "This is a very treatable kind of cancer and since they caught it early in stage one, the treatment and recovery is very high."

"So what's gonna happen?" asked Joyce, who looked close to tears.

"I'm going to have an operation next Friday. They're admitting me Thursday night and then they'll have the operation on Friday to remove the cancer."

"What can we do to help?" Jim asked. Chris smiled at him.

"Just be here for me. That's all I need from all of you. I have the best support system anyone could ask for."

"We'll stay with you the whole weekend!" Dustin declared.

"Yeah, we'll bring you chocolate and candy!" added Lucas.

"You idiots, he won't be able to have sugar after major surgery!" Max yelled. "But we will stay with you, Chris."

"Are you in any pain?" El asked.

Chris shook his head.

"I've just felt pretty tired lately and I looked it up and they say issues with your thyroid can make you tired."

"We love you so much, honey," Joyce said, standing up and pulling Chris into a hug. "We'll all be there with you during the operation."

"Yeah, I'll take off the whole weekend and your Dad is going to be ordered to as well," said Jim.

"Thanks, Chief," Dale said, giving Jim a pat on the arm.

"And I have a feeling your Mom is gonna need a few drinks to survive the weekend, so I'll sneak some in," said Steve.

"Steve!" Pearl exclaimed. Everyone laughed.

"I'll have to bring some movies for you to watch, buddy," said Jonathan. "I know the TVs at hospitals get boring after a while."

"You're gonna be fine, Chris," said Mike, giving him a smile. "I know you'll get through this. But we'll all be here with you through it."

Chris beamed at Mike and hugged him. Will soon joined the hug and Richie did right after that. Soon, the rest of The Party had crowded around them and they all held each other.

"I'm overwhelmed," Chris said, wiping a tear away as the group broke

apart. "I'm so lucky to have you all."

"We love you, Chris," Will said as he hugged Chris tightly.

"And we always will," added Richie as he kissed Chris on the cheek.

Chris beamed around at his friends and family, his heart full of love.

"I love you all so much."

8. Opening Up

"You boys gonna be okay while we go to bed?" asked Dale as he and Pearl stood over the sectional, where Chris and Will were sitting together, huddled under a blanket in their pajamas.

"Yeah, Dad, we'll be fine," said Chris. "You guys get some sleep."

"Well, don't stay up too late, boys. I know it's Friday night and everything, but we don't need you fighting off a lack of sleep," said Pearl, the seriousness evident in her voice.

"We won't, Mom, I promise."

"Yeah, Aunt Pearl, we're just gonna stay up for a little bit and chat, and then we'll go to sleep," added Will.

Hearing Will's statement seemed to relax Pearl a bit. Chris grinned slightly to himself; she always took Will's word in situations like this because he always knew exactly what to say.

"All right, boys. We'll see you in the morning. Have a good night."

"Night, Mom and Dad."

"Goodnight," said Will.

Dale and Pearl disappeared from the living room. Once they heard the door to the master bedroom close, Chris turned to Will.

"Thanks for staying over," he said with a smile. "I don't think I could sleep alone tonight with everything that happened today."

"Of course. I'm happy to stay with you. And truth be told, I don't think I could've slept away from here if my life depended on it. I'd be to worried about you."

"Well, thank god Mom agreed to let you stay the night."

Will smiled, but hesitated before he spoke again. Chris seemed to notice this and raised an eyebrow at him.

"Are you scared of what's gonna happen?" Will asked. "I mean, it is cancer, even if it is treatable."

Chris took a deep breath before responding.

"I was at first, but I wasn't exactly scared of dying if it came to that," Chris said softly. He grabbed onto one of Will's hands and held it tightly. "If I'm being honest, I was more worried about you and everyone else, and how it would hurt you if I died."

"Oh, Chris," Will said, gripping Chris' hand even tighter.

"I know, I probably shouldn't have thought of that, but I couldn't help it, Will. But, it's okay now. We know that it's cancer, and we know that there's a high chance that I'm gonna beat it and recover. I'm not scared anymore, Will. Especially now that I know everyone has my back. It was cathartic for me to be honest with everyone about it."

Will nodded and Chris a smile. He opened his mouth to say something more, but hesitated. Chris looked at him questioningly.

"What's up?" Chris asked.

"Maybe this isn't the best time to talk about it."

"Oh, please, there's *never* been a better time to talk about something else. Trust me, I don't mind being distracted from all of this."

Will took a deep sigh.

"It's about Mike."

"What about him?" Chris asked, sounding genuinely curious.

"Well, when you told us that it might be cancer yesterday, I kinda freaked out on the way home," Will said in a small voice. Chris stared him in the eyes as if trying to silently reassure him. "I just had so many possibilities running through my head, including you dying and it scared me so much, Chris. The thought of losing you destroyed me."

Will paused here to compose himself. Chris squeezed Will's hand

reassuringly, inviting Will to continue.

"When we got back to my house, I kinda broke down when Mike asked me if I was okay."

There was a beat before Chris replied.

"There's nothing wrong with that, Will. I'm sure Mike didn't think any less of you if you cried in front of him."

"No, it's not that," Will said quickly. "Um...when he saw me crying, he pulled me into a hug. It was fine, and it was nice, really. I needed that. With everything that was going through my head, I just needed someone to be there for me. And he was. Mike was great about it."

"But?" Chris prompted.

"When I had calmed down, I told him about everything I was thinking. He told me that it was going to be okay, and that he would be with me through it all, no matter what happened. And then, the next thing I know, Mike gave me a...he gave me a kiss on the forehead before he told me again that everything was going to be okay."

Will took several deep breaths at this, as if he were starting to hyperventilate. Chris scooted closer to Will and wrapped an arm around his cousin. Will immediately leaned into Chris' embrace.

"How did you feel about him doing that?" Chris asked.

Will breathed a sigh of relief, grateful that Chris was not judging him for what he just admitted.

"If I'm being honest, I did like it. But the thing is, I'm not sure if Mike did it because he has feelings for me, or if he was just being a good friend and comfort me."

Chris nodded in understanding.

"You know, I do think that Mike probably does have feelings for you," Chris said. "I mean, hell, Richie has all but told me that he does, but he hasn't outright said it. Still, I'm pretty sure Mike does have feelings

for you, Will. With the way that he looks at you, it's obvious to me."

"I was afraid you'd say that."

Chris shook his head slightly.

"And what about you? How do you feel about Mike?"

"I...I don't know...I mean," Will felt his body tense slightly and he looked up at Chris, who had a blank expression on his face but was looking directly into his eyes as if he were reading Will's mind. Will knew that he couldn't lie to him. "I mean, yeah. I'm pretty sure I love him, Chris. I don't know how I know, but I think it's been there for a while, probably ever since he and I met."

Will took a deep breath after admitting this.

"Oh god. I've fallen in love with him!"

"Will, listen to me," Chris said, tightening his embrace of Will. "I know you're scared to love someone again, especially after you got hurt the last time. But I think you can love someone again and be all right. I mean hell, if I can trust Richie the way I do, you can certainly trust Mike. I know that in my heart, Will. Mike is a good guy, and he won't hurt you."

Will took several deep breaths before nodding as he lay his head on Chris' shoulder.

"I know he's a good guy, I know that," he said. "And you're right, I *am* scared of getting hurt again, but if you can tell someone how you feel and take a chance with them, I can, too. But I don't know when I should tell him how I feel."

"Well, the timing probably won't ever feel right," said Chris, who started thinking deeply. They sat in silence for several seconds before Chris' eyes lit up as an idea struck him. "I know! You can tell him when I'm having my surgery next week!"

"What's that now?" Will asked, sounding exasperated.

"Think about it, Will, you're gonna be spending that whole time

worrying about me, right?" Will sat up from Chris' shoulder and looked at him. Will opened his mouth to respond but Chris covered his mouth. "Oh, come on, I know you, Will, you don't have to hide that you're gonna be worrying about me."

"Well pardon me for caring!"

Chris chuckled.

"No, I don't think it's a bad thing, and trust me, I am grateful for it. But I am saying that you could use a distraction when I'm having the surgery, and what better thing to distract you than you talking to Mike?"

"That seems to be a horrible time for me to spring that on Mike!"

"Yeah, but think about it like this: if you confess how you feel to him, and he feels the same way that you do, and the two of you end up together, I'll wake up to hearing good news, other than the surgery being a success."

"Of course you gotta make this about you," Will said, lightly punching Chris on the arm.

"I'm just saying I wouldn't object to finding out that you let yourself be happy, Will. That's all I ever want for you Will: for you to be happy."

Will opened his mouth to protest again before he thought about the kindness of Chris' words. Here was Chris, the only person in the world for whom Will would willingly stay in a hospital overnight other than his parents and El, and Chris was telling Will to do something to make himself happy. Instead of answering, Will smiled again and laid his head back on Chris' shoulder.

"You know, I think I might just do that," Will said.

"Good," said Chris, laying his head on top of Will's. "You deserve to be happy, Will. And I know the timing is a little awkward, but there's no better way to take your mind off of worrying about me."

"You've made your point," Will said, pretending to sound annoyed but

smiling nonetheless. "Thanks, Chris."

Richie sat down on Mike's bed when he noticed his twin had buried his face in his hands and was shaking his head slightly.

"What's going on, Mike and Ike? Got something on your mind?"

"It's nothing you have to worry about, Richie," Mike replied irritably.

"Oh, come on, we're brothers, Mike. We tell each other everything."

"Please just leave me alone."

"You know I'm not gonna do that, Mike and Ike, so what don't you just tell me what's on your mind?"

"I KISSED WILL, OKAY?"

Richie certainly wasn't expecting that answer. His eyes widened in shock as Mike's face turned beet red. Mike look absolutely mortified. Unfortunately for Mike, Richie recovered first.

"Could you have said that louder, Mike and Ike? I think there was someone in Russia who didn't hear you just now."

"Oh, fuck off!" Mike snarled, throwing a pillow at Richie.

"I'm just joking, Mike" Richie said exasperated. "Would you relax? Is it so bad that you kissed Will? I mean you've already told me that you love him."

Mike sighed and resolved himself to humoring Richie.

"I didn't kiss him on the lips, Richie."

Richie's facial expression didn't change. If anything, he looked even more amused.

"Then what's the big deal if you didn't kiss him on the lips?" Richie paused before his eyes lit up. "Unless you're telling him that you literally kissed his ass or something..."

"God, can you not do that when I'm trying to have a serious conversation with you?" Mike demanded, glaring at Richie, who held up his hands in surrender.

"All right, all right, so where did you kiss him, then?"

"I kissed him on the forehead when I was comforting him about Chris after we went back to his house," Mike explained. Richie bit his tongue to stop himself for asking why that was such a problem. Mike seemed to see the question dance across Richie's face and decided to answer it. "I was just trying to comfort him, and I don't know what came over me, but I kissed him on the forehead while I was hugging him."

"That's not so bad, Mike," Richie said gently. "You were just being a good friend. And I know how you feel about Will. Is it so bad that you showed him some affection?"

Mike thought about this for a moment before he responded.

"I know, but I'm worried that Will doesn't feel the same way about me."

Richie couldn't help himself. He dissolved into a fit of laughs while Mike glared at him, turning red in the face again.

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to laugh at you, Mike, but come on!"

"What?" Mike snapped.

"Mike, anyone with eyes can see that Will feels the same way about you."

"What are you talking about?"

"Come on, Mike!" Richie said, now sounding impatient. "The way that he looks at you when you talk about literally anything, even when you're boring the rest of us to death. The way he turned to you when he was worried about Chris. The way that he looked at you the first time you guys met. I mean, you'd have to be freaking blind not to notice that he has a crush on you, Mike."

Mike opened his mouth to retort, but he was interrupted by Richie's phone ringing. Richie pulled his phone out of his pocket and grinned when he saw who was calling.

"Scuse me, Mike, boyfriend duty calls," he said before he answered the phone. "What's up, my love?"

Mike tuned out Richie's phone conversation, and lost himself in his thoughts. He could hear the truth in Richie's words. Will did look at Mike intently any time he talked. It was like Will was holding on to his every word and his every movement like he depended on it. And the way Will didn't hesitate when Mike pulled him in for a hug when he was crying and worrying about Chris. That had to mean something, didn't it?

Mike shook his head out of his thoughts when he saw that Richie had taken his phone away from his ear and was looking at Mike again, smirking.

"What's up with Chris?" Mike asked, trying to sound casual.

"Oh, he was just telling me about his grand plan to get you and Will together."

"WHAT?"

"Relax, Mike and Ike. Chris knows how you feel about Will. And before you get your panties in a knot, no; I didn't tell him. He worked it out for himself. I just confirmed it when he asked."

"So Chris knows?" Mike asked, trying to keep his calm despite the anger rising within him.

"Yes and is that such a bad thing, Mike? If there's one person who can keep this a secret, it's Chris. You know that."

Mike sighed deeply.

"Yeah, I guess that's true," he said, releasing some of his anger. "So, what's this grand plan?"

"Oh, Chris just has a plan for when you and Will are going to have an

opportunity to tell each other how you feel."

"What do you mean how *we* feel? Don't you mean how I feel?"

Richie shook his head, the grin returning to his face.

"No, Mike and Ike, I mean for the both of you. I won't say much, but it seems to me that Will just might return your feelings."

"Why? What did Chris say?"

"Now you know I'm not going to tell you that."

"Damn it, Richie!"

"Hey, relax, will ya?" Richie said, still smiling as if the whole situation was amusing to him. "Look, Chris just says there's going to come a time soon when you and Will be able to talk to each other."

"When?" Mike asked impatiently.

"That's a state secret, Mike."

"He didn't tell you when?"

"No, he did, but he asked me not to tell you when that is. Chris told me that you should just prepare for the moment to happen at any time."

"You do realize this doesn't help my anxiety about this, right?"

"I know that, Mike, but at least you know that the time is coming. And isn't it high time you stuck to your end of our little bargain? After all, I did tell Chris how I feel about him. You promised to do the same with Will."

Mike bit back a retort and instead lost himself in his thoughts again. After several seconds, he nodded reluctantly.

"Fine," he said. "I will tell Will when the time comes." Richie raised an eyebrow at him. "I promise, I will tell him. Can I at least know when I'm supposed to tell him?"

"I'll just say this, Mike: you have a few days before Will is gonna talk to you."

Mike sighed again.

"Am I crazy?"

"Do you really want me to answer that question?" Richie asked, grinning again.

"No, but you know what I mean. It's insane that I'm gonna tell Will how I feel. It almost feels like I'm betraying Charlie."

At last, Richie's face softened and he looked at Mike with empathy. Richie silently grabbed onto Mike's hand and used his thumb to lightly rub Mike's wrist.

"I get it," Richie said in a soft voice. "But he would've understood, Mike. I can promise you that. And he would want you to move on and to be happy." Richie hesitated. "And that's what I want for you, Mike: to be happy."

Mike nodded as tears welled in his eyes. Richie pulled him into a hug and held him tightly as Mike cried lightly into Richie's shoulder.

"It's gonna be okay, Mike. I promise."

"I love you, Richie. I don't know what I'd do without you."

"The feeling is mutual, brother. I love you, too."

9. The Procedure

Will's face lit up when he saw Chris was lying on the bed, sleeping peacefully. He quietly walked over to Chris' bedside, not wanting to disturb his cousin. When he reached Chris, Will put one of his hands onto Chris' arm. Chris didn't respond. Will smiled slightly to himself.

"Chris," he said quietly. "Chris, it's Will."

There was no response. Frowning, Will shook Chris' arm slightly.

"Chris?"

Still, nothing.

Will started to worry, but he thought perhaps Chris was simply sleeping deeply.

"Come on, Chris, it's time for you to wake up."

Will shook Chris' arm harder this time. Still, there was no response. Panic started to course through Will.

He's gone said a voice in his head.

No that can't be. He was supposed to get through the surgery just fine.

Maybe something happened.

No. He's alive I know it.

Will reached down with his free hand and shook Chris as hard as he could. When he got no response at all, Will started to cry.

"Chris!" he shouted. "No! You can't be dead. You can't be!"

Will pulled himself onto Chris' bed and picked up Chris, who felt lighter than normal. Chris still did not budge. Will wrapped his arms around Chris and buried his head in Chris' chest as he started to sob.

"No, Chris! Please! I love you! Please, come back to me! Chris!"

"Chris," Will said in a sad voice.

"I'm here, Will," Chris whispered back, gently shaking Will. "I'm right here with you."

Suddenly, Will's eyes shot open and he gasped.

"Chris!" Will whispered sharply, not meeting his cousin's eyes.

"Hey, hey, I'm right here, Will. It was just a bad dream."

Will's eyes widened as he turned to face Chris, who was looking at him with a small smile on his face.

"Hi," Chris said weakly.

Will burst into tears. Chris stood up from kneeling next to Will and sat down on the sectional as Will sat up and threw his arms around Chris' neck and sobbed. Chris spoke soothing words into Will's ear as he hugged him and rubbed circles on his back. It was several minutes before Will's sobs subsided and his breathing returned to normal. When Chris heard Will quiet down, he pulled away from the hug, but kept his arms wrapped around Will.

"Are you okay?" Chris asked gently.

"Oh god, Chris. You were dead. You were dead."

"Hey, hey," Chris said as he pulled Will into another hug and fresh tears fell down Will's face. "It was just a bad dream. I'm here, Will. I'm here."

Will took several deep breaths before he broke apart from the second hug.

"Oh, it was horrible, Chris. I found you in bed after your surgery, but you wouldn't wake up. I tried as hard as I could, but then a voice in my head told me you were gone. I tried to deny it, but you wouldn't move, no matter what I did. I was crying on top of your body and that's the last thing I remember."

"It's okay, Will," Chris said. "I know how scary that must have been for you. I'm so sorry that you had to have that horrible of a dream."

"It was bound to happen," Will said dismissively. "I knew that I was gonna have a bad dream about all of this. I'm just so scared of losing you, Chris."

"So you've told me," Chris said, nodding. "But I want you to know something, Will: I will always be with you. No matter what, you'll always have me in your heart and in your memories. And just remember this: no one's ever really gone, Will."

Will nodded as he wiped away a fresh set of tears that had fallen down his cheek. Chris grabbed onto one of Will's hands and held it firmly.

"You feel this?" Chris asked. Will nodded. "I'm never letting go, Will. I'm never letting go. I promise."

"Never let go," Will echoed as Chris pulled him in for another hug. They held onto each other for about a minute before Chris whispered into Will's ear.

"Better now?"

"Yes."

"Then we should probably get some sleep," Chris said. "But I'll be here with you all night, okay?"

"I know," Will said, nodding as he lay back down and Chris shifted over to his pillow on the sectional.

Once Will was situated, Chris reached over and grabbed onto Will's hand, which was hanging over the side of the sectional. It was an awkward angle, but Chris didn't care.

"This way you know that I'm here," Chris offered as an explanation.

"Thank you," Will said as he closed his eyes, his exhaustion started to take over his body. "I love you, Chris."

"I love you too, Will. And I'll never let go. I promise."

Sunday morning

Chris sipped his coffee, grateful that his mother had made it for him. After the restless several nights of tossing and turning and worrying about his surgery, Chris needed the extra boost to wake up.

"Chris, can I talk to you about something for a minute?" Pearl asked as she finished putting their plates into the dishwasher.

"Course, Mom," Chris replied cheerfully. "Is this about my surgery?"

"Sort of, but it's more about my work."

Pearl closed the dishwasher and sat back down at the dining table with Chris and Dale. Dale set down the newspaper he was reading and looked at his wife, nodding at her.

"Well, we all know that I'm taking this week off in preparation for your surgery," Pearl explained. "I know I don't have to, but my mind is going to be too occupied about the surgery that I wouldn't be able to focus properly at work. But, of course when I told my boss that I was taking the week off, I had to tell her why."

Pearl paused here and took a sip of coffee. Dale grabbed one of Pearl's hands and held it gently.

"When I told her, she thought it might be a good idea for us to tell the viewers why I'm going to be gone. Since I am one of the main nightly news anchors, we're likely going to get a bunch of calls and emails to the station asking where I am.

"And when I thought about it, I thought about how overwhelming it would be to have to answer all of those questions, even though I have a responsibility to do so. So that's when Jackie had the idea: what if I went on the air on Sunday night and simply explained what's going on and just be honest with the viewers?"

Pearl stopped again to gauge Chris' reaction. Chris had a neutral expression on his face, but didn't say anything.

"Now, your father and I talked it over..."

"And we think that it should be up to you if you do this," Dale finished for Pearl. "It's your decision, Chris. You have no obligation to agree to this."

"That's right, honey. We just want to be open about this to you and give you a chance to say no if you want. Please don't feel pressured to agree."

Chris simply stared at his parents for several moments as multiple thoughts ran through his head. Finally, he nodded slightly.

"What all will happen?" he asked quietly.

"I'll go on the air tonight during the 10:00 show," Pearl explained. "It's the Sunday night show and it gets the most viewers. I'll speak to the viewers during the last segment of the broadcast and I'll simply explain why I'm not going to be at work this week. I'll tell them about your diagnosis and I'll ask that the viewers keep you in their thoughts this week."

Chris nodded again.

"All right," he said. "I don't really like being the center of attention, but getting well wishes might actually help me get through this week. But no interviews okay, Mom? I don't really wanna appear live on camera or anything."

"Of course," Pearl said quickly. "You won't have to actually appear on the show. I'll just give a monologue about what's happening and the producer and production team can have photos of you and the family on display. Will that be all right?"

"Okay, but I get final say on which pictures you use," Chris said with a smirk.

Dale and Pearl laughed appreciatively. They looked as if all tension had left their bodies now that they had talked to Chris.

"It's a deal, honey."

Sunday evening

Chris sat down on Jim and Joyce's sofa, with Will and Richie on either side of him. Mike sat opposite Will, while Dustin sat next to Richie. El sat on one of the sofa's armrests while Max and Lucas sat on the ground next to the sofa. Meanwhile, all of the adults had gathered around the living room. Steve was sitting in the recliner, while Jonathan sat with Joyce on the loveseat. Dale stood with Jim behind the sofa.

Everyone's attention was on the TV, which was tuned into WTHR. It was nearing 10:30, which meant the broadcast was coming to an end. Pearl was due to talk about the diagnosis and her absence from the program once the broadcast returned from commercial break.

Sooner than most of them expected, the news logo reappeared on the screen. Chris sat up slightly when he saw this. Richie grabbed onto one of his hands and curled their fingers together. Will wrapped an arm around Chris' other arm. Chris smiled at both of them as he focused on the TV.

Pearl had joined the rest of the 10:00 team on the set. Weatherman Leon Davidson sat to her right, while anchor Sam Jackson sat on Pearl's left, while sports anchor Janelle Porter sat to Pearl's far left of the anchor desk.

"Good evening, everyone," Pearl said in her usual commanding voice she had when she anchored the news. She appeared to Chris to be rather stoic looking and he had to admire his mother's professionalism, given the personal topic she was about to discuss. "I know you're not used to seeing a second news anchor on a Sunday night, and you're probably surprised to see me at work on a Sunday."

The rest of the news team grinned slightly at this before Pearl went on.

"This week, I will be absent from anchoring the news, and I feel that you have the right to know why. I've consulted with the station management and with my family about this, and we all agree that it is best for me to personally explain my absence this week, rather than me respond to several emails and phone messages when I return to

work.

"This past Wednesday, my son Chris was at an annual doctor's appointment. We thought it was going to be routine visit, but the doctor discovered something that needed further testing. Two days later, we received the news that no parent or other loved one wants to hear: Chris has stage one papillary thyroid cancer."

Pearl paused her briefly as photos of her, Dale and Chris and the rest of the Byers family played over her monologue.

"Now, I will admit that was certainly one of the hardest moments of my entire life. And if you can imagine how I felt, you can imagine how my dear son felt. Chris is a wonderful young man."

Chris blushed slightly at this. Richie leaned over and gave him a kiss on the cheek while Will lay his head on Chris' shoulder.

"He is one of the most respectable young people you'd ever meet. He has a heart of gold and would never speak ill of anyone unless he was trying to make them laugh. That's probably my favorite thing about my son: that he can always make everyone smile, especially when they need it the most.

"I admit I haven't done much smiling the last few days, but Chris has maintained a positive attitude, so I will maintain a positive attitude as well. Chris is going in for surgery this week and although it's not happening until Friday, my mind would be too occupied on his operation for me to be able to do my job. So for this week and for at least part of next week, I will be off the air as I spend time with my family and help Chris through his recovery.

"In this time, I simply ask that you respect my family's privacy. We do welcome your well wishes, and I know Chris will appreciate them the most. However, if you see my family or me out in public, please respect our privacy. We know you mean well, but your well-wishes in your calls, emails and Facebook posts are enough for us."

The photos disappeared and Pearl reappeared at the anchor desk with the rest of the news team.

"Finally, I want to extend my sincerest gratitude to the news team here at WTHR. My colleagues have been nothing but supportive, and I have our wonderful news director, Jackie Freeman, to thank for her sympathy and understanding. And my early thanks goes to all viewers who wish Chris and my family well."

"Thank you for being so open with us and the viewers," Sam said as she wiped a tear away from her eyes. "I know that can't have been easy for you to discuss."

"We love you so much," said Leon. "And we love Chris. He's like a son to many of us here at the station. And we love your whole family as our own. All of you will be in our thoughts and prayers this week."

Leon gave Pearl a quick kiss on the head.

"Thank you, Leon," Pearl said as she choked back tears.

"We'll be thinking about you all week," said Janelle the sports anchor. "And I think all of us will be holding our little ones a little closer tonight. I admire you for being so open, Pearl."

Pearl gave Janelle a warm smile as Sam turned to face the camera.

"I know I speak for everyone at the station when I say that we all will be thinking of Chris, Pearl and their whole family this week. We love all of you so much and we'll be thinking about you all week long."

"And with that, we seem to be out of time," Pearl said with a chuckle. "The morning team will join you all tomorrow beginning at 5 o'clock with all of the latest news and weather. And the rest of the news team here at WTHR will provide you with the news as usual, just with one less person this week. Goodnight, everyone. Thank you for joining us."

With that, the news program faded to commercial break. The Party spontaneously started clapping, all of them beaming at Chris, who had tears in his eyes, but was smiling.

"Well, that wasn't too embarrassing," he said with a shrug.

Wednesday evening

The Party was sitting around Chris' living room. It was the final night they would all be together before Chris checked into the hospital the following evening in preparation for his surgery on Friday. Max and El had prepared a meal of steak and chicken fajitas for everyone, which were served alongside a large pile of chips for everyone to make nachos to go with their fajitas. Everyone was eating and laughing heartily, enjoying one another's company despite the looming prospect of the surgery. It lingered in the back of their minds, but didn't come to the forefront until Chris stood up once he was done eating.

"All right, everyone, you'll forgive me if I'm about to get sappy for a minute."

"Sappiness sucks!" Dustin interrupted, earning a slap on the arm from Max.

"Yeah, no speech!" Lucas yelled with a grin.

"Now you of all people, Lucas, should know there's no such thing as stopping me from giving a good speech."

"Eh, it was worth a try."

"What do you want to say, Chris?" El asked patiently, giving Chris a small smile.

"Well, if there's anything that all of this has taught me, it's that I should always remember to be grateful for what life has given me. I know it's a little cliché, but this diagnosis has opened my eyes to everything good that is in my life. I've always known it, but I don't think I've ever truly expressed my gratitude for all of the good in my life. I have the best family anyone could ask for."

Chris paused as he grinned at Will and El, who smiled back at him and nodded.

"And I have the best friends that I could ever have hoped for. You all have been so wonderful through all of this that I truly understand now how lost I would be without all of you supporting me."

"So, again, you'll forgive me for being sappy, but there are some things I'd like to say to all of you. And I'll start with Dustin."

"Of course, the most important one gets recognition first!"

Chris chuckled.

"Dustin, I want to say thank you for always making me laugh, including just now. Your humor has gotten me through some truly dark times in life, especially this past week with my diagnosis. So, thank you for always being there with a joke to make me laugh and feel better."

"Sure thing, buddy. I'm always happy to see you laugh."

Chris smiled as he turned to Lucas.

"Lucas, thank you for your never-ending kindness, even if you are a smartass from time-to-time." Everyone giggled at this. "But, seriously, you are one of the kindest people I know and you've never said a bad word about anyone, and I truly appreciate that. So thank you."

"I love you, man."

"The feeling is mutual," Chris said as he turned to Max.

"Max, I want to say thank you for letting me win the occasional debate, even though you are the debate master. I will never deny that. And I want to thank you for always bringing a smile to my face. Your smile is contagious and when you're happy, I'm happy too."

"Thanks, Chris," Max said, wiping a tear away. "Great, now you've got me all emotional."

Everyone laughed as Chris turned to El, smiling at her.

"El, you are an incredible cousin and you've truly outdone yourself this week. Thank you so much for being there with me throughout the week as I saw all of those messages from Mom's viewers and for being a shoulder to cry on when some of the more personal notes got to me."

"You deserved nothing less, Chris."

"Mike, thank you for always listening to me, and I mean truly listen. You never tune out what I'm talking about and you always engage with me. I've always admired that about you. And I want to thank you for helping me remain positive through all of this."

"I'm happy to help."

Chris smiled and turned to Will, who stared back at Chris with a smile and tears in his eyes.

"Will, my dear Will. The best cousin on the planet, no offense to El." He glanced at El, who grinned at him and shook her head as if silently telling Chris she took no offense. "Thank you for always having my back, especially through all of this. And thank you for keeping me grounded and reminding me how much I mean to you and everyone else in the family."

"I'll never let go, Chris," Will said as he wiped fresh tears off his cheek.

"Neither will I," Chris said before he turned to Richie.

Richie stared at Chris with love in his eyes. Chris could feel tears threatening to spill down his face, but he wanted to say his final thanks before he cried.

"Richie, I saved you for last because I knew I wouldn't be able to get through everyone else's after you without crying. I want to thank you for all of your love and support, Richie. Not just with this diagnosis, but ever since New Year's when you took a chance on us, knowing what it might have cost you. I'm so grateful that you did, Richie. It brought us together in a way I never thought possible."

Richie cried several tears and beamed at Chris before he spoke.

"I love you so much, Chris," he said in a shaky voice.

"I know," Chris replied. Everyone chuckled, appreciating the Han Solo reference. "I love you too, Richie. With all of my heart."

Richie's face lit up even more if that were possible.

"You aren't afraid to love anymore?" he asked quietly.

"After this? No. Nothing could make me feel safer than to be loved by you."

"Oh, Chris!" Richie exclaimed as he leapt forward and pulled Chris toward him. Tears were falling down both of their faces as Richie pulled Chris in for a kiss. They kissed deeply for several moments as the rest of The Party cheered loudly for them. Finally, they broke the kiss, but Chris pulled Richie in for a hug and held him tightly.

Will stood up and joined the hug. Mike followed him just after that. Within seconds, the rest of The Party had joined the hug, all of them holding tightly onto each other, united in their love.

Thursday evening

Chris looked around his hospital room. It had been about half an hour since he had checked in with his parents. They were meeting with Dr. Burton to discuss the surgery. Chris was about to turn on the TV to kill time when he heard a knock at the door.

"Hey, any guys about to kick cancer's ass in here? And if so, is he the one I love?" Richie asked in a loud voice as he and Will walked into the room. Will looked mildly embarrassed to be standing next to Richie.

Chris laughed as two of the most important people in his life walked over to either side of his bed.

"How are you?" Will asked, bending down and giving Chris a hug.

"It feels weird being here, you know? Like, I've known about it for almost a week and I've been thinking about it constantly, but now that's it's actually here, it's kinda weird."

"Well, at least we're here now to help keep you entertained," Richie said as he gave Chris a kiss and sat down on Chris' right.

"Thank god for that. I was starting to go a little crazy in here just sitting by myself."

"How about a movie to pass the time?" Will suggested, lifting a bag that Chris hadn't noticed him carrying. "I brought as many as would fit in here. Any preferences?"

"What all do you got?"

"Star Wars movies, of course, The Matrix trilogy, looks like four of the Harry Potter movies, To Wong Foo..."

"Oh my god, yes, we have to watch that!" Chris interrupted. "Please tell me you haven't seen it," he added, turning to Richie and grinning widely. Richie shook his head. "Oh, Richie, you're in for a treat!"

Will smiled and stood up, walking over to the TV and standing on a chair next to it to reach the Blu Ray player. It took him a few moments before the movie started to load on the player. Will returned to Chris' bedside and sat down on Chris' left, holding the remote. He pressed play on the remote when the menu appeared and then lifted his hand to hold onto Chris' left hand. Richie did the same thing on Chris' right.

The three boys sat in peace as the movie played. They laughed many times throughout it, even though Will and Chris had seen it several times. Richie was laughing harder than them and kept trying to guess what was going to happen, much to Chris and Will's amusement. When it was over, Will stood up to take the movie out of the player when they heard a voice.

"Good evening, boys, I hope you were enjoying a good movie."

Chris looked over and smiled as Dr. Burton walked into the room. She had a smile on her face and looked happy to see that Chris was having a good time in his hospital room.

"Chris, Richie, it's good to see you again," she said. "And I don't think we've had the pleasure to meet," she added, turning to Will and holding out a hand. "I'm Dr. Burton."

"I'm Will Byers, Chris' cousin."

"Ah yes, Chris has spoken very highly of you," Dr. Burton replied warmly. Will blushed slightly at this as he sat back down next to Chris. "So, how are you feeling tonight, Chris?"

"Honestly, I'm surprised I'm not starving," Chris replied sheepishly. Dr. Burton chuckled. "Seriously, though, it's been a while since I've gone so long without a meal."

"Well, the good news is you'll be able to get nutrients starting tomorrow through your IV after the surgery is done. Other than that, how are you?"

"A little nervous, but ready to get this over with. I have a wonderful support system, so that's really helped me get through this week."

"Yes, I can see that, Chris," said Dr. Burton, giving another smile. "I can see how close the three of you are. In fact, I was going to offer you two the chance to stay the night with Chris, if you would like."

Both Will and Richie's eyes lit up. Chris smiled happily.

"Could we?" asked Richie, trying not to sound too excited.

"Of course, I'd be happy to arrange it. You boys could stay the night in here, this way Chris doesn't have to sleep alone tonight."

"I appreciate that, Doc," Chris said.

"So, what do you say, Richie and Will? Would you guys like to stay the night?"

Will turned to look at Chris and Richie, who both nodded at him.

"Yeah, definitely!" Will exclaimed.

"We'll stay and try to stay out of trouble," Richie added.

"When he says that, Doc, it usually means he is going to cause trouble," Chris said with a grin.

"Hey!"

Dr. Burton chuckled and gave the three of them another warm smile. Her smile was contagious and the three boys found themselves grinning even more broadly than they already were.

"Then I'll arrange to have you two stay the night with Chris. Though, I'd suggest you have your parents bring you a change of clothes. I'll be sure and let them know when I talk to Dale and Pearl again and have them let your parents know you'd like to spend the night."

"Thank you, Doctor Burton," Chris said.

"Well, if there's nothing else, I'd better get going. I like a full night's rest before I lead an operation like this. So, Chris, Richie, Will: I'll see you boys tomorrow around lunchtime. You boys have a good night."

"Good night, Doctor," Chris said.

"Good night!" Will and Richie echoed.

Dr. Burton left and Chris had Will put in the first Matrix movie. When it was over, it was nearly 10:30, and all three boys were starting to feel drowsy. As if on cue, Joyce and Karen knocked on the door and walked in.

"Doctor Burton told us about you two staying the night," Joyce said.

"We'll be sure to bring you boys some fresh clothes in the morning," Karen added.

"How are you feeling, Chris?" Joyce asked as she reached the bedside with Karen.

"Just tired, mostly," said Chris. "And really glad that these two are staying here tonight."

"Well, you get some rest and we'll see you in the morning, okay?" Joyce said, bending down and giving Chris a kiss on the forehead. "I love you, Chris."

"I love you too, Aunt Joyce."

Joyce bent down to give Will a kiss as well as Karen reached down

and grabbed onto one of Chris' hands.

"You take care, okay Chris?" she said in a soft voice. "I'll stop by in the morning to drop off Richie's clothes, but I'll need to go into work right away. Unfortunately, I wasn't able to get time off. I'm sorry."

"No, don't worry about, Ms. Wheeler," Chris said reassuringly. "I understand, completely. I'm just glad you'll be here this weekend."

"Thank you for understanding, Chris. You're a remarkable young man. My Richie is so lucky to have found you."

"I think I'm the lucky one," Chris said, turning to Richie and smiling at him.

"Sweet you are. Well, you take care tomorrow, Chris. I'll be by as soon as I can after work to visit you."

"Thank you."

"And you don't cause too much ruckus here, Richard," Karen added, walking around the bed and giving Richie a kiss on the cheek.

"Never!" Richie said in a mischievous tone. "I love you, Mom."

"I love you too, honey."

"Thanks again for letting these two stay the night with me," Chris said. "I'll see you both tomorrow."

Friday

The Party had arrived in Chris' room by 9:00 that morning, a full three hours before Chris' operation was due to start. Dustin and Lucas and brought board games for them all to play, while El and Max brought roses and a card signed by everyone. They spent the morning laughing and enjoying each other's company, all of them silently dreading what they knew was inevitable.

Soon, it was 11:45 and Dr. Burton appeared in the room.

"Good morning, everyone," she said kindly. "I'm glad to see you all having a great time, but I'm sorry to say that's it time for Chris to head up for his surgery."

"Of course, let's just clean up this mess and we'll get out of your way," El said hurriedly as she and Max started to pick up the Monopoly board. Max glared at the boys, who all scrambled to help pick up the pieces, including Chris, even though he was practically held down by the blankets on his bed.

Once all of the pieces were picked up, each Party member hugged Chris before they left.

"Good luck, Chris," said Dustin.

"We'll see you in a few hours," said Lucas.

"Yeah, don't take too long unless you seriously want me to have to fall asleep in a waiting room!" said Max.

"Take care, dear cousin," said El.

"Think positive and everything will be okay," said Mike.

With that, the five of them left, leaving Chris in the room with Will, Richie and Dr. Burton.

"Hey, Doc, can you give me a minute with these two?" Chris said. "I promise I won't take long."

"Of course," Dr. Burton said with a smile. "The team is ready when you are, Chris."

She turned and walked out of the room. Richie bent down and gave Chris a kiss.

"I'll be here when you wake up, I promise," Richie said.

"I know you will be," Chris replied, smiling. "I love you so much."

"I love you, too."

Chris turned to Will, who leaned down and hugged Chris tightly.

"Take care," Will whispered.

"I will. You too."

Will nodded as he broke apart the hug.

"I know what to do and say," Will said. "I'll do it when the time is right. And I promise I'll be here too when you wake up."

"I love you, Will."

"I love you too, Chris."

"Come on, Willie Will," Richie said, slinging an arm around Will and pulling him toward the door. "Let's not take up too much more of Chris' surgery time."

"See you guys in a few hours."

When the boys disappeared, Dr. Burton walked back into the room with several nurses. Together, they started to set up Chris' bed to move it to the operating room.

"You have wonderful friends," Dr. Burton observed.

"The best ones on the planet. I'm so lucky."

"I can see that. Are you ready to go up for surgery?"

"As ready as I can be."

Dr. Burton smiled.

"Your parents will see you before we take you into the operating room. And I'll be with you the whole time, Chris, I promise."

"Thank you, Doctor."

Dr. Burton nodded. The nurses finished preparing Chris' bed and the group of them pushed it out of the room and toward the operating center, which was located further down the hall. After about two

minutes of being rolled, the nurses stopped outside a set of glass doors, where Dale and Pearl were waiting.

"How you doing, son?" Dale asked, doing his best to hide his feelings, but failing miserably.

"I'm fine, Dad, I promise."

"Well, you just take it easy in there, okay? I love you so much, Chris."

"I love you too, Dad," Chris said, smiling as Dale bent down to give him a hug.

Chris turned to face his mother, who looked as if she were holding back tears. He reached out and grabbed her hand.

"How are you doing?" Chris asked.

Pearl smiled sadly at him as a tear fell down her face.

"I'll be fine, honey, it's *you* we have to worry about."

"Cancer schmancer, Mom," Chris said. Pearl chuckled at his joke and leaned down to kiss him on the forehead.

"We'll see you soon, honey. I love you."

"I love you too, Ma. Just don't worry too much about me, okay?"

"That's my job, Chris."

Chris smiled and nodded at her as she and Dale waved at him and the nurses rolled Chris' bed into the operating room. Dr. Burton quickly shook hands with Dale and Pearl before following the rest of the entourage into the operating room.

Chris waited patiently for several moments as Dr. Burton and the rest of the nurses prepared for the surgery. He tried to focus on the news he hoped to hear about later from Will, but it wasn't enough to distract him. Within moments, Dr. Burton reappeared above him, this time wearing scrubs and had a mask covering the lower half of her face.

"This won't take too long, Chris," she explained. "We're just gonna go in, take out the cancer and sew you back up. You should be back to your room in no time. How are you doing?"

"Probably as well as you'd expect."

Dr. Burton chuckled.

"Well, we're ready to start whenever you are Chris. I'll administer the anesthetic when you're ready."

Chris took a deep breath.

"All right, let's do this, Doc."

"Okay. This will sting just a little bit, but you don't have to worry about anything, okay?"

Chris nodded and closed his eyes. A few seconds later, he felt a prick on his arm and then felt a Band-Aid cover the puncture wound made when the shot entered his arm.

"All right, Chris, you're gonna start feeling sleepy in just a few moments," said Dr. Burton. "I don't want you to fight it, okay?"

"Okay," Chris breathed back, the drowsiness already taking over him.

"I want you to count down from one hundred, Chris. Countdown and you'll be asleep long before you reach zero."

Chris nodded.

"100, 99, 98..97...96...95...94..."

He lay face down, listening to the silence. Somehow, the silence was comforting to him. He was perfectly alone, he knew. Nobody was watching. Nobody else was there. He was not entirely sure that he was there himself.

A long time later, or perhaps no time at all, it came to him that he must exist, must be more than disembodied thought, because he was

lying, definitely lying, on some surface. It felt like grass.

Chris opened his eyes quickly. He was almost overwhelmed by the brightness surrounding him and nearly shut his eyes again. It took several seconds for them to adjust, but once they did, Chris could take in the beauty surrounding him.

He stood up and looked around. He was surrounded by beautiful greenery and what appeared to be a large lake in the background. There was no sign of wildlife or of any people in his vicinity. Chris pondered why he had arrived in this place alone.

As he did, that's when they suddenly appeared. It was as if Chris' thoughts about being alone had summoned them. Chris' eyes were immediately drawn to them. He blinked when he saw them.

"Hello Chris," said the voice of his dead grandmother. Chris hadn't heard her voice in nearly five years, but it sounded exactly the same.

"Grandma Vicky?" Chris asked, hardly daring to believe it.

"You don't have to worry, Chris," said Lauren, his grandfather who had passed when Chris was just in kindergarten. He still remembered sitting in his grandfather's lap at several holidays, but missed getting to form a true relationship with him.

"We're here to be with you as you go through your surgery," said Vicky with a kind smile.

"So you know about it?"

"We know about everything, but we still want to hear about it from you."

"Like what?"

"Like this wonderful young man who has stolen your heart," Lauren said, grinning broadly. "Tell us about him."

"Richie?" Chris asked. Vicky and Lauren nodded. "What can I say? He's the one who taught me that it's okay to be vulnerable and that it's okay for me to love someone romantically, even if there is a

chance I'll get hurt. He's so wonderful; I wish you guys could meet him."

"Well, we certainly know how happy he makes you, Chris," Vicky said. "And we're so glad that you found happiness with him."

"Just like we knew he would. And like we know that Will is going to, as well," Lauren added with a nod.

Chris looked up at Lauren with a confused expression.

"You mean, you know that Will is going to take a chance on Mike?"

"Oh, I think he's doing that right now, Chris dear," said Vicky. "After all, you did tell him to do it so that he wouldn't spend your whole surgery worrying about you."

Chris grinned.

"Yes, that is true," he said. "So, will he...Actually, I don't think I want to know. I want to hear it from Will."

Lauren and Vicky smiled at him.

"I think you'll like what he has to say when you wake up, Chris," said Vicky.

"We're very proud of you for encouraging Will like that, Chris. He certainly deserves to go for it."

"Yeah, he does," Chris said fondly. Suddenly, a thought occurred to him. "I'm curious: is all of this real? Or is it just happening inside your head."

Lauren and Vicky exchanged an amused look.

"Well, of course it's happening inside your head, Chris," said Lauren, sounding exasperated.

"Why should that mean it isn't real?" asked Pearl.

Chris smiled at them.

Damn it, Chris you were right.

Will should have known Chris would be right. He had spent the last 45 minutes since entering the waiting room doing nothing but worrying about Chris. Even though he knew the risks were minimal, Will couldn't help but worry. Chris was like his brother and losing him would be like losing part of himself.

Sighing to himself, Will shook away those thoughts and looked over at Mike, who was reading a magazine. Will stood up and walked over to Mike, who looked up when he sensed Will in front of him.

"Hey, you wanna go for a walk, get out of here for a little bit?"

"Uh, sure," Mike replied, sounding uncertain. Richie nudged him slightly and gave Mike a look. Mike frowned at Richie but then his eyes widened as if he suddenly understood something. Will silently groaned to himself, realizing that Chris had lied to him earlier that week when he said he had called Richie to discuss his surgery; instead, Will realized, Chris had told Richie about his plan to get Will and Mike together.

Will shook his head and led Mike out of the waiting room and to the outside of the hospital. They walked over to a water fountain and sat down next to it. The silence surrounding them was deafening and Will wasn't sure where to start. Finally, he took a deep breath and simply turned to Mike.

"Mike, there are some things I need to say to you," he said.

"Okay," said Mike, sounding uncertain.

"It's nothing bad, I promise, but I do need to say all of this because it's important." Mike nodded at him. "Um, first of all, I wanted to say thank you for being there for me after Chris was diagnosed. If you hadn't been there to comfort me, I probably wouldn't be okay with this. I mean, I'm still not okay with it, but you helped make it better and I want to say thank you for that."

"You don't have to thank me for that," Mike said, giving Will a small smile. "I was just trying to be a good friend."

"I know, and I truly appreciate it," Will said, hesitating slightly. Mike gently grabbed onto Will's wrist and nodded at him.

"It's okay, Will, you can tell me anything."

"I know," Will said, nodding and taking a deep breath. "When you comforted me like that and you kissed me on the forehead, it was the final confirmation for me."

"Final confirmation?"

"About my feelings for you, Mike. The feelings of love that I have for you."

Mike froze, but kept his hold on Will's wrist as he stared deeply into Will's eyes.

"I don't know when these feelings started and they might have started the day we met," Will continued. "I mean, I knew instantly that I was attracted to you, but I tried to push it down, not wanting to feel close to someone like that after my last heartbreak. But after everything that's happened here, I can't deny it anymore, Mike. I love you, Mike. I love you with all of my heart. I don't know if you feel the same way about me, and I can live with it if you don't. I just couldn't go on living without telling you how I feel."

Will dropped his gaze and stared at his legs. Mike didn't say anything for several seconds. Will waited with bated breath for several seconds until he felt Mike leaning closer to him. He looked up just as Mike came into contact with his lips.

Suddenly, Will felt his whole body warm up. It wasn't that cold for late February, but the kiss instantly heated him up. He felt a fire coursing through his veins and he felt loved and protected. Will smiled into the kiss as he cupped Mike's face gently.

After several seconds, they broke apart, both of them blushing profusely. Will waited a few moments before he spoke again.

"So...is that a yes?" he asked sheepishly.

Mike burst into laughter and pulled Will into a hug.

"Of course it's a yes, Will," Mike said. "I can't believe you feel the same way about me that I feel about you!"

"You love me, too?" Will asked incredulously.

"Of course I do, Will! I love you so much! And I love you even more now that you've told me how you feel. Oh, Will, I didn't know it was possible to love someone like this again!"

Will broke apart the hug and pulled Mike in for another kiss. Both of them were crying lightly. Will held onto Mike protectively as they kissed, trying to reassure him that this was okay. Their love for each other was real and above all, it was mutual.

"So, is this what Richie and Chris were planning?" Mike asked when they broke apart again.

"I'm guessing so," Will replied, rolling his eyes. "It was Chris' idea for me to tell you when he was in surgery. He thought it would be a good distraction from me worrying about him. I must say, he was certainly right."

Mike chuckled.

"Richie was a total asshole about it. He told me Chris had a plan, but he was super vague on the details. But at least he told me to trust him that everything was going to be okay. I'm glad I listened to him."

"Me too," Will said.

They smiled at each other and stood up. Mike held out his hand for Will and Will took it, blushing slightly. They walked back into the waiting room hand-in-hand and sat down together, across from Richie, who grinned widely at them and gave them a knowing look.

Chris stirred. He could feel that his body was sore, but it was a reminder that he was alive and well. He opened his eyes and saw that his vision was blurry.

"Mama?" he asked in a quiet voice.

"Yeah, I'm right here, honey," Pearl said, the relief evident in her voice. "Your Dad is here, too. And so are Will and Richie."

"Hey, kiddo," Dale said, his crying evident in his tone of voice.

"Hi, Dad," Chris said weakly as he vision came back into focus and he saw his parents standing over his bed. They were smiling widely at him and both looked relieved.

"It's all over, Chris," Pearl said. "You're cancer free!"

"Oh, thank god," Chris said.

"You're gonna be just fine, Chris," said Dale. "How do you feel?"

"Sore, mostly," Chris said. "But I'll live. Will and Richie are here?"

"Yeah, we're right here," Will said as he and Richie appeared on either side of Chris' parents.

"We're not going anywhere," Richie added.

"I'm glad to see you guys," Chris said with a smile. "Um, Mom and Dad, can you give us a few minutes alone?"

"Sure, honey," Pearl said, nodding at him. "We'll go and let everyone else know that you're awake. I love you, honey."

"Me too, kid," said Dale.

"I love you guys, too."

Dale and Pearl left the room. Will and Richie scooted over chairs and sat down next to Chris. Both of them looked exhausted, but happy.

"You guys okay?" Chris asked.

Richie nodded and bent down to kiss Chris on the forehead.

"I'm just glad that you're okay and you're now," Richie said. "I'm so happy to see you."

"Me too," said Chris before his eyes traveled to Will, who looked a

little nervous.

"What?" Will asked.

"Oh, come on, did you seriously think that I wasn't going to immediately ask if you did it?" Chris asked.

Will rolled his eyes.

"Fine, Mr. Impatient. Yes, I talked to Mike."

"And?" Chris prompted.

"And it turns out you were right. He feels the same way about me."

"Told you so," Chris said with a satisfied smirk.

"Oh, shut up!" Will said playfully.

Chris turned and gave Richie a knowing look.

"It's about time, don't you think?" he asked.

"Definitely," replied Richie.

"Well, thank you both for pushing us to it," Will said, sounding happy. "I know we're both grateful."

"I'm just glad you're happy, Will," Chris said, giving Will a smile and holding out his hand for Will to hold. Will took it, smiling at Chris as a few tears fell down his face.

"I am happy," Will declared.

"Good. I love you, Will. And I'm so proud of you."

"I love you too, Chris. And I'm so glad you're here and you're safe."

Chris turned to Richie and smiled at him.

"I love you," Chris said. "I don't think I'll ever get tired of saying that, but I love you."

Richie grinned.

"And I'll never get tired of hearing it."

10. Epilogue

"So, are you gonna tell me why you need a new tie and vest for the band concert?" Richie asked as he followed Chris into JC Penney's.

"Nope," Chris replied with a smirk. "I need it because I'm going to be doing something that's a surprise for everyone at the concert."

"A surprise?" Richie asked, raising his eyebrows. "You know I love surprises, Chris!"

Chris grinned as they reached the suit and ties section for teens and he started browsing for a matching tie and vest.

"I know you do, Rich, which is why I'm definitely not telling you what it is."

"Can I at least have a hint or something?"

"How about this: you can try guessing what the surprise is and I'll tell you how close or far you are from getting it right."

"All right!" Richie exclaimed, looking determined. Chris couldn't help but laugh at his boyfriend's enthusiasm. "Uhhh...you're gonna play a bunch of solos and there's gonna be one in a song that we all like!"

Chris looked impressed.

"Something like that," he replied slyly as he continued to rifle through the various ties and vests. "I do have a couple of trumpet solos during the show, but there's also one big solo I have that's something different. It's something I've never done before."

"Ooooooh!" Richie said excitedly.

"But, no, I won't tell you anymore. I've already said too much! I mean heck, not even Mom or Dad know what the surprise is, and it's next to impossible to keep a secret from them!"

"Why the big secret?" Richie asked, giving Chris a light punch on the arm.

"I just want it to be a nice surprise for everyone. Normally, I don't invite the entire party to the band concert cause of finals, but I really want everyone there so they can see this surprise. I'm doing it all for you and everyone else."

Richie nodded, but looked like he wanted to keep talking. He didn't press the topic and instead joined Chris in looking for a tie and vest. In just seconds, Richie spotted a forest green set and grabbed it.

"This, this right here would be perfect!" Richie said, handing the tie and vest to Chris, who took it and held it over his chest. "Oh, yeah, babe. You're gonna look totally hot wearing that!"

Chris grinned sheepishly.

"If you say so," he said shyly.

"Hell yes I say so. Seeing you in that would be a wet dream!"

"Beep beep, Richie," Chris said slightly irritably, though he was smiling.

Richie grinned.

"Oh come on, you know you love me," Richie said.

"Yeah, and I'm an idiot," said Chris as he smiled and leaned in, giving Richie a quick kiss. "I agree; this color will be perfect."

Richie and Will sat together in the middle of the row where the rest of The Party, Chris' parents and Will & El's parents were sitting. The band had just played the second to last song of the evening and the stage was being rearranged for the final song.

"So, what do you think the surprise is, Willy Will?"

Will shrugged.

"No idea, Chris just told me that it would happen during the last song."

"Yeah, he just told me it was going to be something he's never done before. Maybe he's gonna play a song by himself with his trumpet!"

"Hmmm...or maybe he's gonna sing or something," Will said, nodding at the stage, where a lone microphone was standing.

"Chris? Sing? I've never heard him sing."

"Neither have I," said Will absentmindedly as he scanned the rest of the stage. "But I also don't see Chris anywhere on stage. That tie and vest you picked out for him make him stand out."

"Damn right it does! I needed a little eye candy while watching this show."

"Oh shut up!" said Mike irritably from next to Will. "Do you have to be so gross?"

"Just stating the truth, Mike and Ike," Richie said before he frowned. "You know, I think you're right, Willy Will. I don't see any sign of him up there."

"Wonder why," Will said. He turned to lean over and ask the others if they knew anything when the chatter of the audience died down as the band director reappeared on stage.

"All right, everyone, thank you so much for your patience," the band director said. "For the final performance of tonight, we're trying something a little different. We'll be performing a song with one of our band members singing the lyrics."

Richie and Will exchanged a look.

"You've heard him perform a couple of times this evening, but please extend a warm welcome to our singer, Chris Byers!"

The band director gestured to his right, where Chris appeared from backstage, smiling and waving at the audience. Will and Richie looked at each other, confused, but cheered loudly with the rest of the group. Once Chris had taken his place at the microphone, the band director stepped away from it and walked over to the side of the stage where a podium was waiting for him.

"Hi everyone," Chris said nervously in the microphone. The Party cheered loudly for him and Chris beamed.

"God he's a knock out in that tie and vest," Richie muttered. Will punched his arm.

"So, I asked if I could perform this song with the band in this style because I believe it makes the song that much more powerful," Chris explained. "We reworked the song from its original rock incarnation and converted into an orchestra piece, with me singing the lyrics.

"This song has always been special to me, but even more so in the last several months. As many of you know, I had a bout with thyroid cancer earlier this semester." At this, a few audience members groaned in sympathy. "But I am happy to say that I am cancer free thanks to the efforts of the medical team at St. Jude's hospital."

Chris paused as the audience cheered loudly for several seconds.

"This song is about open-mindedness, and waking up to all of the things you've missed in life," Chris continued. "Ever since my diagnosis, I haven't simply been going through the motions in life as I had been. I live for each day, and I remember that life is priceless and to always make each day count.

"Now with all of that, I'd like to dedicate this song to my family and to The Party, as we call ourselves. You all have been so wonderful this past few months that I couldn't do this without you. And my heartfelt thanks to Mr. Linville for letting me perform this song. Here goes nothing."

With that, Chris nodded at the band director, who motioned for the song to begin. A programmer in the back of the room started to play the song. It started slow and quietly and gradually built in volume for several seconds before Chris broke in with lyrics.

How can you see into my eyes, like open doors?

Leading you down into my core, where I've become so numb

Without a soul

*My spirit's sleeping somewhere cold
Until you find it there and lead it back home
Wake me up inside
Wake me up inside
Call my name and save me from the dark
Bid my blood to run
Before I come undone
Save me from the nothing I've become
Now that I know what I'm without
You can't just leave
Breathe into me and make me real
Bring me to life
Wake me up inside
Wake me up inside
Call my name and save me from the dark
Bid my blood to run
Before I come undone
Save me from the nothing I've become
Bring me to life
Bring me to life
Frozen inside without your touch, without your love darling
Only you are the life among the dead*

As Chris' vocals carried for several seconds, the audience started to cheer loudly, but none where as loud as The Party, with Richie and Will dominating the cheering.

I've been sleeping a thousand years, it seems

Got to open my eyes to everything

Don't let me die here

Bring me to life

Wake me up inside

Wake me up inside

Call my name and save me from the dark

Bid my blood to run

Before I come undone

Save me from the nothing I've become

Bring me to life

Chris took a deep breath.

Bring. Me. To. Liiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiife!

Chris' vocals carried for nearly ten seconds before he quieted and the music played for a few seconds before it was done. When all was silent, there was a brief pause before the audience erupted in cheers again. Chris beamed at the audience as he took a bow and waved, tears streaming down his face.

"Goodnight, everyone!" Chris yelled into the mic before he took another bow and walked off stage.

"Holy shit, I didn't know he could sing!" Richie yelled as the cheering continued as Chris disappeared from view.

"Me neither!" Will shouted back. "That was amazing!"

Within moments, the applause died down and everyone in the audience started to stand up and gather their belongings before leaving the auditorium. The Party stood up quickly and followed the adults out of the auditorium and into the hallway, where they stood waiting for Chris. In just moments, he appeared, beaming at everyone.

The adults all smothered Chris in hugs and congratulating him on his performances. When they were done, Chris went up to each party member individually and hugged them.

"Chris that was amazing!" Max exclaimed.

"Man, how did you learn to sing like that?" asked Lucas.

"Remember when I blew off all of our studying sessions, saying I had private lessons?" Chris asked.

"Dude, no shit, you were taking singing lessons?" Dustin exclaimed.

Chris grinned.

"That really was incredible, Chris," El said with a smile as she hugged him.

"Seriously, though, how did you manage to learn that so quickly?" asked Mike.

"I guess I just got lucky," Chris said with a shrug.

Chris turned to Will and pulled him into a tight hug.

"That was incredible!" Will said. "I can't believe you did all that and dedicated it to us!"

"I had to," Chris said with a smile. "You guys have done so much for me, it was the least I could do."

"Yeah, but I'm the one who picked out that smokin' hot tie and vest!" Richie said, grinning at Chris, who pulled him into a hug.

"And I'm totally grateful for that. And for everything else you've done

for me. I love you," he added in a whisper just for Richie to hear.

"I love you too," Richie whispered back before they broke apart their hug and grabbed hands.

"Thanks again for coming tonight, everyone," Chris said to everyone. "I just wanted to show my appreciation for all of you and I figured what better way to express myself than through music? And you guys did save me and woke me up to everything I might have missed in life, so that's why I chose that song."

Everyone beamed at him and shouted various words of encouragement and love.

"I love you all so much! Shall we?"

Will walked up to Chris and grabbed his free hand, while Mike grabbed Will's other hand. In just seconds, the rest of The Party had grabbed hands. They walked out of the school hand-in-hand, with Chris and Richie in the middle of the group and the adults following them. They stepped out into the warm spring evening, a sense of calm and filling their souls. For the first time in a long time, Chris felt at peace with everything in his life.